

PLAYING DOCTOR:
SATIRE, LAUGHTER AND SPIRITUAL
TRANSFORMATION IN
VALLE Y CAVIEDES'S *DIENTE DEL PARNASO*

R. John McCaw
State University of New York at Buffalo

Satire has enjoyed remarkable popularity among artists and scholars, arguably because it lends itself easily to multiple interpretations based on sublime innuendo, subtle agendas and suggestive posturing. The appeal of satire comes from the playfulness involved as intellectual acuity is harnessed to raw emotion, and as the depravity of humankind is presented through the artfulness of creative energy. As it isolates, exaggerates and pokes fun at salient characteristics of individuals and societies, satire informs and reflects one's ludic instinct until, at last, the urge to tease and the desire to be entertained are satisfied. While written and read, created and consumed, satire purges the intellect and the emotions, and tacitly or expressly fosters one's understanding of what, ideally, a world beyond satire might be like: "Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude to experience" (Frye 224). In Juan del Valle y Caviedes's *Diente del Parnaso*, the satirist's relentless attempt to expose the moral and social dystopia of seventeenth-century colonial Lima conceals a longing for society's return to a moral standard, and promotes a *modus operandi* for achieving this goal.¹

As is often the case with satire, the spectacle of playfulness in *Diente* calls attention to itself and, in so doing, may keep the reader from appreciating the moral impulses and social vision that drive the satirist to take up the pen in the first place. Johan Huizinga has argued that the act of literary creation, and poetry in particular, is grounded in playful competition (132-33), a concept that he calls "agonistic aspiration" in the realm of philosophy (120). From the poet's act of playful competition, and from the prophet's act of "agonistic aspiration," we may understand the facet of poetry and philosophy that extends beyond play: "The conceptual value of a word is always conditioned by the word which expresses its opposite. For us, the opposite of play is earnest, also used in the more special sense of work; while the opposite of earnest can either be play or jesting, joking" (44).

The satiric playfulness of *Diente* yields an earnest subtext which, in the context of the seventeenth-century controversies surrounding the role and

implications of medical science, itself has polemic value. By seeking within *Diente* the grounds from which Caviedes's satiric impulse emerges, we may see how the text constitutes a rudimentary program for moral reform and social change. In this way, *Diente* engages one of the most highly charged cultural debates of Peru's Counter-Reformation, a debate that not only questions the legitimacy and impact of medicine and its practitioners, but also explores the epistemological foundations of mundane healing:

While undoubtedly offering a number of possibilities for the betterment of daily living for the general population, [science's] powers were also overestimated in some circles, and this inevitably led to its mystification. Caviedes counters this tendency by inferring that scientific exposition, like other discursive forms, contains errors and therefore warrants similar scrutiny. (Johnson 90)

Caviedes indeed scrutinizes the role of medical science, but he also goes beyond scrutiny as he advances the religious life as a practicable alternative to medicine. In *Diente*, then, lies a constructive side to satire, a literary tradition known primarily for its destructive surface.²

When we meet the acerbic wit and the mordant caricature of the harshest of literary satire, it is reasonable that we should search for motives to help explain how the target of satire has managed to deserve such vitriol. In *Diente*, the main object of derision is the medical profession, and special attention is given to specific doctors and medical practices of Caviedes's Lima.³ The detail of Caviedes's barbs against specific individuals and practices has led Kolb to conclude that the satirist's motives in *Diente* are fundamentally personal:

There has been some attempt to interpret his violent diatribes as mere impersonal and humorous observations on one segment of the society of his time, but Caviedes' own admission of first-hand experience with the doctors, and the fact that his satires against them were composed after a long and serious illness, would indicate that his antagonism was personal in origin. (9)

This idea, echoed by Earl Fitz (134), focuses on the personal dimension of Caviedes's satire, and is not necessarily incompatible with Lúcia Costigan's view that Caviedes's motive for writing satire has social origin in the class conflict created as the middle class—including doctors—grew and prospered at the expense of the moneyed aristocracy:

[T]he poetry of Caviedes . . . has a conservative ideological basis that reflects the dominant ruling class of the . . . Spanish state society. . . . When [his] seigniorial status was threatened, Caviedes . . . turned against the emerging bourgeoisie made up of white plebians who emigrated from

Europe and of mestizos and mulattoes. (89-90) ⁴

These two perspectives approach the issue of motive from different angles, yet they inspire some very important questions: In spite of the personal nature of the satire in *Diente*, is there anything generic, theoretical, or "im-personal" about Caviedes's art? What, precisely, is the "conservative" ideology of Caviedes as seen in *Diente*? And what links, if any, exist in *Diente* between art and ideology, literary conventions and authorial worldview?

Caviedes's personal attacks against the medical charlatans of his time are the main feature in *Diente*, as they occupy the core of the work from the "Dedicatoria" to the "Romance jocoserio." However, the beginning of *Diente* (including the "Fe de erratas," "Tasa," "Privilegio," and "Prólogo") serves a more general purpose as it aims to provide crucial information and interpretive cues for the reader. It is in this section where Caviedes not only inscribes the moral and social goals of *Diente*, but also outlines the course by which the reader will meet these goals. In this section, Caviedes sets up a process of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment that prepares the reader to make sense of the personal satires which, read together as a separate, self-contained series, move from subject to subject without embodying a moral progression or educational ascent. As if to preface this series of personal satires, Caviedes draws from the humanist tradition of demonstrating human folly in order to underscore man's absurdity, point out his wrongdoing, discourage his association with earthly deceptions, and strengthen his alliance with God.⁵ Caviedes uses a variety of artistic techniques and rhetorical strategies of Renaissance and Baroque humanism in order to transcend the personal nature of his satire and construct a philosophical and theological position consonant with his status as a *criollo*. Specifically, Caviedes uses two humanist *topoi*—"world upside-down" (*mundo al revés*) and "undeception" (*desengaño*)—in order to articulate and promote a rhetorical strategy—persuasion via laughter—aimed at transforming the conscience of the reader.

The "world upside-down" commonplace has existed in European culture since classical times, but the presence of the *topos* in Renaissance and Baroque humanist literature is largely a legacy of the literature of the Latin Middle Ages (Curtius 94-98). A survey of the critical literature on the "world upside-down" reveals the versatility of the *topos* as it has passed through a variety of formal incarnations in different media.⁶ The constant, underlying principle of the "world upside-down," however, is that "todo consiste en trocar entre seres humanos o animales, consigo mismo o con los de otra especie, las funciones asignadas por la sociedad o la naturaleza" (Vaíllo 364). Much literature of the Spanish Baroque, including the picaresque novel of Alemán and Quevedo, and the comedia of Tirso and Calderón, didactically uses "world upside-down" imagery in tandem with the language of

desengaño in order, first, to posit a cultural crisis, and then to suggest a resolution to the crisis. Maravall sees the first stage of this process, "world upside-down,"

... como producto de la cultura de una sociedad en vía de cambios, en la que las alteraciones sufridas en su posición y en su función por unos y otros grupos crean un sentimiento de inestabilidad, el cual se traduce en la visión de un tambaleante desorden. Considerado así, sería resultado de una estimación conservadora, o, tal vez mejor, tradicional. No cabe duda de que el tema revela...un sentimiento de inestabilidad y mutabilidad. (313)

During Caviedes's lifetime, the perception of the world as a place of crisis was produced not only by political, economic and social currents generally common to late seventeenth-century Spanish and Spanish-American society, but also by events specific to Lima and its environs, such as the pirate raids of the 1680s and the devastating earthquakes of 1687 (Reedy 15-18). The particular vision of the world as the result of an inversion of natural and social order, however, was informed and shaped by the intellectual, moral and spiritual forces of the Counter-Reformation:

For Christians, the Bible and the Fathers of the Church established the idea of a world divinely created in perfect beauty, order and harmony and reason, turned upside-down by the Fall of Lucifer and of Adam and Eve which transformed the *mundo* . . . into *inmundo*, as Gracián called it in *El Criticón*. From this it followed that charges of the existing order were feared as dangerous and the work of the devil or the result of man's folly and sinfulness. (Grant 1972: 122)

During Caviedes's time, the "world upside-down" *topos* served to describe the crisis as well as explain it, and the explanation of crisis ultimately resided in an apocalyptic worldview of earthly disorder.

Caviedes's first deployment of *mundo al revés* in *Diente* occurs in the so-called "Fe de erratas," a mock exegesis of the poem which, as even the name suggests, implies that the doctors in the satires are sometimes falsely credited with fulfilling their functions as healers. As a fictive testament to Caviedes's reassessment of the role of doctors in society, and thus as a fictive symbol of Caviedes's ability to see the reality of society's disorder through an apparent order, "Fe de erratas" functions as an interpretive mechanism to ensure that the hapless reader also approaches the satires with an understanding of how the medical profession has turned the world upside-down. Caviedes begins by pointing out a role-reversal between doctors and hangmen:

En cuantas partes dijere

Doctor, el libro, está atento;
 porque allí has de leer verdugo,
 aunque éste es un poco menos. (213)

The death-inducing function commonly ascribed to the hangman is now assigned to the physician, and the mortal role of the hangman is diminished in the process. With this transference of duties in place, Caviedes proceeds to expose the necessary reassignment of values regarding specific aspects of medicine and the medical practice:

Donde dijere receta
 dirás estoque, por ello;
 pues estoque y verduguillo
 todo viene a ser lo mismo.
 Donde dijere sangría
 has de leer luego degüello,
 y cuchillo leerás donde
 dijere medicamento.
 Adonde dijere purga
 leerás Ñndió fin el enfermo;
 y a donde remedio diga
 leerás muerte sin remedio.
 Donde dice practicante
 leerás, sin más fundamento,
 sentencia de muerte injusta
 por culpas de mi dinero.
 Y con aquestas erratas
 quedará fielmente impreso
 porque corresponde a las
 muertes de su matadero. (213)

As Caviedes elaborates the "world upside-down" *topos* here, he provides a deflationary interpretation of standard medical principles and practices, and rhetorically up-ends the legitimacy and authority of the medical profession by portraying it as contrary to its perceived mission.

By combining perceived social truths of his time with the artistic liberties of satirical exaggeration in order to point to the medical profession's central role in the topsy-turvy world, Caviedes does much to prepare the reader to judge the human condition and, ultimately, to react against it. Caviedes's rhetorical strategy in *Diente* is not only to expose the fragility of human beliefs and practices rooted in false notions of progress, but also to provide an alternative social and philosophical agenda whose purpose is to set the world aright by deflating man's god-like pretensions, and by restoring the traditional cosmology within which fallible man stays away from actions best left to divine powers:

In Western Europe, from the Middle Ages to the present day, behind the idea of a world upside-down lies that of a world the right way up, created divinely according to a rational order, and Christians looked back to the Bible and the Fathers of the Church for one created by God in beauty and harmony for the fulfillment of man. (Grant 1973: 106)

If, in effect, the idea of a “world upside-down” implies that of a world the right way up, it is useful to look in *Diente* for clues that suggest how the world, according to Caviedes, ought to be. Caviedes begins *Diente* with a quotation from St Augustine that introduces his agenda: “no está obligado el cristiano a llamar médicos en sus enfermedades, porque es más acertado fiar en Dios” (212). Caviedes comments on these words with a brief rhyme:

Dos veces para mi santo
es Agustino discreto:
una, por contra Doctores,
otra por santo estupendo. (212)

Caviedes persists in his creation of an ideological dichotomy between good and evil, right and wrong, divine healer and mundane healer, God and Man: “El Eclesiástico dice que dejava caer Dios al pecador en manos del mal médico” (212). And he continues:

Si en manos del mal doctor
cae el pecador ¿el justo
en cuáles ha de caer,
porque no hay bueno ninguno? (213)

When read against the rest of the beginning of *Diente*, these words give rise to a well defined worldview. Caviedes foregrounds his negative view of doctors as false healers and spiritual contaminants whose patients are either sinners to begin with or sinners after having contact with them. Even purportedly wise men (“el justo”) are susceptible to the earthly folly of false healing and spiritual contamination. Caviedes, then, implies a positive vision of God as a true healer of the spiritually good and just. Caviedes not only prepares the reader to react against man’s folly, he also offers him an ideological point of view to embrace: the damned fall into the hands of doctors, but the saved seek healing from God. In effect, Caviedes’s *Diente* offers spiritual redemption as well as a matter-of-fact look into folly and charlatanry. Caviedes portrays the “world upside-down,” but he supplies the ways and means needed to restore order to the world, and in so doing, he offers the reader a chance to deliver himself from evil, as manifest in society.

After portraying his world as topsy-turvy, while providing a sense of how his world ought to be, Caviedes supplies a way for the reader to move

himself and society from dystopia to utopia. In the "Prólogo" to *Diente*, Caviedes's jocular warning to his readers about doctors refers seriously to a dedicated spiritual life as an alternative to life lived within the trappings of human folly. Indeed, the comic "Prólogo" subtly outlines a process of personal transformation which, presented as a way to grapple with the social and moral crisis manifest in the falseness of the physicians, may be called *desengaño*:

Si la idea de que el mundo es teatro, sueño, ficción —respecto a una trascendente esencia— el desengaño a que nos lleva a aprehender tal verdad no opera tampoco postulando una renuncia o exigiéndola de quien la reconoce. Si todos soñamos la realidad, quiere decirse que hemos de adecuar a esa condición de lo real nuestro modo de comportarnos. (Maravall 410)

The reader's spiritual transformation lies first in her ability to perceive the moral significance of the "world upside-down" rhetoric inscribed in the text, and then in her capacity to interpret this rhetoric as a necessary stage in the experience of revelation through undeception. This transformative process is particularly embedded at the end of the "Prólogo," as Caviedes "reveals the alleged purpose of his writings" which, according to Fitz, aim "to inspire laughter, which promotes good health, and thereby counteract the deleterious ministrations of the doctors" (143).⁷ Caviedes, however, does more than merely offer laughter as a remedy for medical incompetence; he prescribes to his readers a comic formula for redemption, a sort of burlesque spiritual exercise, with earnestly restorative powers of moral importance. Caviedes's prescription of laughter reads like a quick guide to spiritual undeception, as it promises, in stages, to liberate the reader from the ill effects of mundane deceptions such as doctors' medical aspirations:

[P]ues para los accidentes
que son de melancolía,
no hay nada que los alivie
como un récipe de risa.
Ríete de tí el primero,
pues con la fé más sencilla
piensas que el médico entiende
el mal que le comunicas.
Ríete de ellos después,
que su brutal avaricia
venden por ciencia, sin alma,
tan a costa de las vidas.
Ríete de todo, puesto
que aunque de todo te rías
tienes razón. —Dios te guarde,
sin médicos ni boticas. (217)

Caviedes not only plans to entertain the reader with an account of various medical follies, but also tries to ensure that he approach the poem with a perspective inclined toward edification, a perspective privileging the primacy of God over the feeble and fleeting epistemology of man. Caviedes has a moral imperative to play doctor, and to do so he aims to control the quality of the poem's reception by providing guidelines for reading his poem. His strategy, extending beyond the immediacy of laughter, requires the reader undeceive and humble himself first ("Ríete de tí el primero") before attempting to perceive the folly of the doctors ("Ríete de ellos después"). After these two stages, the reader may take his new perspective to a universal plane ("Ríete de todo . . .") that incorporates his new philosophy ("Dios te guarde, / sin médicos ni boticas"). Johnson correctly observes that "Caviedes . . . calls into question the authority and reliability of scientific discourse, a new and emerging form of hegemonic expression" (89), but in so doing he provides a way out of science's hegemony. Caviedes uses *mundo al revés* to set up this process, but he uses the language of *desengaño* to establish it. As Caviedes suggests that there are only two sides to take with regard to the proper role of doctors—either we favor the deceptions of the mundane world, or we strive to understand and honor divine revelation—the poet prophetically aims to ally himself with God (thus reinforcing the demonic nature of doctors), and he asks us to do the same in order to enjoy and learn from the satire.

Indeed, as the entire "Prólogo" proposes to challenge current notions of power and offer laughter as a pseudo-medicinal and para-spiritual alternative to the beliefs and practices of doctors, it likewise questions the authority of doctors to ply their trade at all. As an earthly representative of divinity, Caviedes attempts to remove legitimacy from the doctors and keep it for himself. Caviedes displaces the earthly healers, the doctors, from power, and instead posits the healing powers of satirical poetry as a mechanism of divine redemption. With the rhetorical mechanism of moral transformation in place, one can see how the rest of Caviedes's work, the grotesque rendering of doctors and their world, contributes to the reader's moral process. The playful deployment of the grotesque in *Diente* emerges from an earnest impulse and strategically encourages the reader to engage seriously with the ethical implications of human medical practice within the context of a Catholic society. The process of reading *Diente* promotes a process of personal transformation, the necessary first step to moral reform and, possibly, social change: "The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better" (Bakhtin 62). By questioning the legitimacy of established medical practice, by exposing its ridiculousness and pretentiousness, and by trying to replace it with laughter and faith, Caviedes promotes the dismantling of

the established power relations of his time in order to restore order.

In *Diente*, Caviedes has a desire to create laughter and deflate the authority of men who work contrary to his understanding of divine principles, though by the end of his life and poetic career, his work becomes much less playful, much more earnest, much more religiously solemn. The revered figures of St Augustine and Ecclesiastes enjoy a privileged place in *Diente*, as Caviedes uses them in order to establish his rhetorical strategies at the beginning of the poem, as shown, as well as at the very end. Caviedes begins his work by establishing a worldview of human folly and by prescribing undeception, and this readies his readers for maximum appreciation of the satire and its moral grounding. Caviedes ends his work by reinforcing this process, as he again defends his anti-medical objective in the "Romance jocosero" by citing the authority of St Augustine and Ecclesiastes. Moreover, Caviedes anchors his credibility more generally in this section with the device of erudition, as he makes reference to dozens of authorities and figures both fictional and real, ancient and modern, Christian and pagan. As Caviedes thus isolates the doctors and their trade and shows them at odds with the authority of humanist learning, the message is playfully but clearly stated: men who aspire to goodness and wisdom eschew the mundane pretensions of false healers, and instead follow examples set by history and seek the guidance of true authorities. Caviedes suggests that substantive moral changes in society are necessary, and change begins with the spiritual transformation of the reader.⁸

Notes

¹See Johnson for an engaging and comprehensive discussion of satire in Colonial Spanish America. Of the many other interesting studies on satire in early modern Spain and Spanish America, Schwartz Lerner's analysis of Francisco de Quevedo's work is particularly useful for approaching the works of Caviedes.

²Johnson notes that the doctors' "ability to diagnose and treat patients was far from scientific in the seventeenth century" (89), a fact that suggests that the cultural debates on medicine not only touched on the rationalism and empiricism of scientific methods versus the resistance of some theocentric philosophies against such methods, but also questioned the viability of method within the scientific and medical communities. See Kolb 14-16 for a detailed discussion of some of the most controversial medical policies and practices in Spain and in the colonies during Caviedes's lifetime. See Green 105-211 for a general discussion of the highly charged intellectual climate of rationalism and theocentrism in which both medical progress and charlatany existed.

³For an interesting account of the specific doctors referred to in *Diente*, see

Kolb 16-29.

⁴There seems to be a lack of scholarly consensus on Caviedes's attitude, as manifest in his writings, vis-à-vis Lima's aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Costigan maintains that Caviedes is situated socially and attitudinally within the aristocracy, but Campa and Chang-Rodríguez claim that "[l]a obra del español limeñizado . . . Caviedes . . . es una reacción contra lo aristocratizante y culto" (31). It is possible to argue that both perspectives hold true at different points in Caviedes's work, but the particular relationship between subject, class, and morality in *Diente* seems more closely to support Costigan's view.

⁵Several engaging studies of general humanism in Spanish Golden Age letters are available, including Bataillon and Parker. The humanist tradition that most certainly influenced Caviedes was the Christian humanism of Counter-Reformation theologians such as the Jesuit Francisco de Suárez, who "took a theocentric, rather than a rationalist or empiricist turn" in their views (Cascardi 120). Also see Green for a useful study of the humanist role in the intellectual culture of Golden Age Spain.

⁶In addition to the studies referred to elsewhere in this article, see Cocchiara for a detailed examination of "world upside-down" iconography in the literary and pictorial arts.

⁷Similarly, Johnson believes that Caviedes "places himself in the physician's position, as a diagnostician, and prescribes the laughter derived from his poetry as a remedy for human malady. Caviedes, therefore, ascribes curative or sanative powers to his satire and offers it, in an extended context, as a panacea for what ails society" (90). I maintain that laughter in itself is not the end of Caviedes's work, but rather that laughter is prescribed as a way for the reader to disengage himself from the folly of mankind and thereby engage himself with spiritual concerns.

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