

CAPONES, ITALIANOS, ERMITAÑOS  
Y LINDOS:  
TOWARDS A QUEER SUBJECTIVITY IN  
GOLDEN AGE POETRY

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In recent years studies by Dan Heiple, Ursula K. Heise, Eugenia Ramos, Dámaris Otero-Torres, Sara Taddeo, and others have asserted that what appears as comedic play in the representation of same-sex flirtations in Spanish Golden Age drama is often well grounded in cultural anxieties about alternative configurations of desire. The representation of homoerotic passions in the *comedia*, they show, does not always work at the service of a subversive agenda, but it cannot be dismissed as mere carnival.

This article seeks to explore a similar, if more limited, situation in Golden Age poetry. The issue at hand revolves specifically around the question of identity. The traits that writers of satirical poems highlight in representing same-sex desire suggest that the sodomite was distinguishable as a type of individual in early modern Spain. He is not a faceless, anonymous sinner, but a discernible character that one may describe, portray, and, more to the point, ridicule. These commonalities of representation would seem to indicate that what has been theorized as a mere behavior, that is, a transgressive act potentially available to all sinners, was in effect read as something akin to a way of being, that is, an identity, or better still, a practice.

In this fashion, Quevedo's acerbic invectives against Italians, hermits, mulattoes, and *lindos* do not constitute an idiosyncratic field within his work. Similar characters and qualities are also objects of mockery for other Golden Age *ingenios*. Moreover, what these literary depictions show is often echoed in the legal documents concerning the prosecution of sodomites at this time. They also feature prominently in the generalized preoccupation with the spread of unorthodox forms of desire. As Richard Trexler has recently asserted:

In the early seventeenth century, the court of Philip IV was famous for its luxury and sexual experimentation. Chronicles of the period are filled with talk of sodomy, both at the court and in Madrid. (. . .) In 1623, a law took effect that rewarded men who married at 18 years and pun-

ished men who were still single at 28. The law was clearly aimed in part against homosexual acts in a society where marriages were thought to be falling. Then in 1635, Fray Francisco de León denounced “hombres convertidos en mujeres, soldados en afeminados, llenos de tufos, melenas y copetes, y no sé si de mudas y badulaques de las que las mujeres usan.” (59)

Clearly, in early modern Spain the proliferation of homogenital behaviors, and—perhaps more significantly—the fear of these social phenomena and their ramifications, roused the anxiety of moralists, the zeal of legislators, and the wit of writers of literary discourse, among many others.

What emerges from these texts, however, is not a definitive identity in the modern sense, but rather an organized compendium of moral, physical, and social characterizations of a type of person. The notion arises then that the constitution of a queer subjectivity in Spain may date back to, at the very least, the early modern period. Although the constructivist biases in our field of study and in related disciplines induce us to place the rise of modern homosexual culture in the late nineteenth century, there are more than enough reasons to be skeptical about all rigid genealogies of desire. As Alan Sinfield has argued:

Ideology is never tidy, though ideologues present it as though it were. (. . .) Of course, the human subject is never full, and hence may, at any moment, appear unformed. And so with gay subjectivity, which because of its precarious social position is anyway more fragile and inconstant: it is on-going, we are still discovering it. (14)

This article aims to further this process of discovery in its Spanish Golden Age context.

As implied above, any approach to this subject matter must of necessity address a multiplicity of discourses. Traditional philological analysis has to be brought along with historical research on the inquisitorial and judicial persecution of sodomites, the invectives of moralists against cross-dressing and the so-called *pecado nefando*, humorous and burlesque writings, medical treatises, historical chronicles, etc. The challenge can be explained thus: in order to render visible what is commonly regarded as positively unspeakable, a *crimen inter christianos non nominandum*, a reader must carefully polish her optical apparatus with a variegated tissue of critical signs. Given the space limitations of this piece, a brief summary of significant aspects of this multi-discursive, cultural matrix will have to suffice.

Like in many other societies and times, a radical sense of otherness has weighed on the sodomite as well as, later, on the modern homosexual.

He is described—preferably and often prescriptively—as *not one of us* but rather a foreigner, a member of a different class or caste, or a marginal being. As the etymology of the word *bugarrón* clearly reveals, in some cases he comes from as far away as Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> In other cases a strictly geographical relocation supplements this ethnic or class displacement. Sailors, hermits, drifters, and other liminal types feature prominently in the literary representation as well as in the social imagination concerning queers. Early modern Spaniards did not act differently in this respect. In the *Siglo de Oro*, they looked towards Italy and the Arab world as the original habitats of the sodomite.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in his *Sátira contra las damas de Sevilla*, Vicente Espinel describes characters he refers to as *lindos* as a “manjar provocativo al moro Muza” (Luján 97), and concludes by making a keen observation and a desperate appeal: “todo el negocio va por lo de Italia / ¡Volved, oh juventud bárbara y ciega, / a aquel antiguo ser de la Vandalia!” (Luján 98).

“Lo de Italia,” the practice that produces that “manjar provocativo al moro Muza,” is obviously what Quevedo aptly sums up as “cosas de aire . . . pecados de atrás,” that is, the characteristic activities of those whom the *Diccionario de Autoridades* describes under the name of *puto*. As a citizen of what he deems a mollified south—pun intended—Espinel’s critique of Sevillian ladies focuses exclusively on the moral, social, and sexual decay of the suspect young men that, one surmises, they have come to favor. In a subsequent rethorical move he casts his call for the lads’ re-masculinization and concomitant moral regeneration as an appeal to a pre-Arabic past. A return to a mythical era of Visigothic racial purity, when the warlike Vandals presumably ruled over their women and other males as “real men” should, is at the heart of this text.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, for Luis de Góngora in a poem entitled “A ciertos mancebos afeminados”<sup>4</sup>, the center of sodomitical persuasions is not Italy, but neither Córdoba, his Andalusian hometown: “Ay, entre Carrion y Tordecillas, / En Castilla la moça dos lugares, / De unos vezinos tan particulares / Que en su particular tienen cosquillas” (f. 3r-v).<sup>5</sup> These peculiar—shall we say queer?—citizens inhabit an indeterminate zone in the vast Castilian plane. Queerness moves thus to a liminal, but imprecise area of the national territory.<sup>6</sup> Still, most of the time, it is the foreigner, whether Italian, Turk, Arab, *morisco*, *converso*, etc. the one who instills the greatest fears of nefarious transgressions in the Spanish psyche. Material sociological echoes of this dread abound. According to Rafael Carrasco, the tribunal of the Spanish inquisition in the kingdom of Aragón most likely received authorization from Pope Clement VII in 1524 to prosecute those apprehended under charges of sodomy in response to anxieties concerning the sexual mores of the *morisco* population in the area: “[N]os parece evidente que el Breve sobre el pecado nefando, al permitir

al Santo Oficio el castigo de los infieles sodomitas, tuvo una primera finalidad antimorisca, fue concebido en un principio como un instrumento represivo dirigido contra esta minoría inasimilada" (58). Unique among other tribunals of the Holy Office, the one in Aragón made use of this special privilege extensively. Among its victims, Italians featured prominently, totalling 13.5% of those prosecuted (217).<sup>7</sup> Another group expressly targeted by the Holy Office, besides *moros* and *moriscos*, slaves and drifters, Italians and other foreigners, was the clergy, a segment of the population traditionally suspect since the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, due to the scrupulous character of the inquisitors, we now have at our disposition a good number of records that offer extremely useful details as to how queer practices articulated an emerging subjectivity in the *Siglo de Oro*.

Among the number of burlesque poems that chastise the figure of the sodomite, one stands out in its sheer richness of detail. This composition by Quevedo, entitled "A un ermitaño mulato," alludes to ethnic divides and class suspicions. Moreover, the text traces a progression in sodomy that links it to both the structure of religious orders and the categorization of sexual transgressions. The short poem is worth reproducing here:

Ermitaño tú? ¡El mulato,  
oh pasajero, habita  
en esta soledad la pobre hermita!  
Si no eres me[n]tecató,  
pon en reca[u]do el culo y arrodea  
primero que te güela u que te vea;  
que cabalgando reses del ganado,  
entre pastores hizo el noviciado.  
Y haciendo la puñeta,  
estuvo amancebado con su mano,  
seis años retirado en una isleta,  
y después fue hortelano,  
donde llevó su honra a dos mastines.  
Graduó sus cojones de bacines.  
Más si acaso no quieres  
arrodear, y por la ermita fueres  
llevado de tu antojo,  
alerta y abre el ojo.  
Mas no le abras, antes has tapialle:  
que abrirle, para él será brindalle. (650, no. 636)

Partly African, possibly of moorish ancestry, and related to the clergy, this hermit appears before us as a compound of all that is potentially queer in the Spanish cultural map. In addition, as ascetic, shepherd, and farm laborer, he is a borderline character, whether living in solitude in an

island, among the sheep, or outside the city. His formation in what could be playfully called "The Order of the Nefarious Brothers" is well traced. He begins as a novice in bestiality, goes through an onanistic retreat from the world of sheep, graduates in zoophilia by moving up in the animal kingdom from the herd to its canine keepers, and ends *cristianamente* in the convenient seclusion of a hermitage as a consummate and potentially assertive sodomite.

Several verses of this text deserve further attention. Quevedo depicts his hermit as instinctively drawn towards homogenital intercourse. In the second line the passerby is alerted to exercise caution on account of the sodomite's keen senses. The animalistic connotations which in this context may seem strictly derogatory gain in complexity when compared to other Quevedesque texts depicting the joys of "normal" sexuality:

Volver quiero a vivir a trochimoche,  
y ninguno me apruebe ni me tache  
el volver de privado a moharrache  
si no lo ha sido todo en una noche (. . .)  
que yo, porque la vida me aproveche,  
por si hay algún bellaco que me escuche,  
tanto estaré contento cuanto arreche. (604, no.596)

The subject behind the poetic voice who in a similar sonnet exclaims "que yo me quiero andar de saya en saya" (603, no. 595) is every bit as organically "arrecho" as the "moharrache" and the mulatto hermit, who, in his own fashion, is also doing his best to "vivir a trochimoche." Moreover, the sort of caprice that would induce one to go from "privado" to "moharrache" in a life of "barata y alegre putería" (603, no.595) can as easily arouse the appetite of those who pass by the hermitage, who may end there "llevados de su antojo" in search of forbidden pleasures.

The correlation of desires charted above gains in significance upon examining the language describing the hermit's penchant for masturbation. In the chapter dealing with lechery and ejaculation of his *Primera parte de la Summa en la qual se cifra y summa todo lo que toca y pertenece a los sacramentos* (1608), father Pedro de Ledesma notes the following about those who indulge in Onan's sport:

Este peccado suele ser tan contino y ordinario, que esta uno como amancebado de si mismo, de tal suerte, que es necesario quando se viene a confessar detenerle la absolucion, por falta de disposicion. El exemplo es, si un hombre cada dia o cada tercer dia cometiese este peccado, seria necesario al tal penitente detenerle la absolucion por la falta de proposito que tiene. (660a)<sup>9</sup>

The similarity of the above passage with Quevedo's text is provocative. Described simultaneously as a sin and a habit, masturbation in this text appears as such a recurrent practice that its absolution as a religious infraction is hardly possible. This move may be seen as a first step in looking as an inherent disorder what is, along with sodomy, one of the main *contra natura* sexual acts. Indeed, father Ledesma's prescription to "cure" this sort of sinner is remarkably modern:

El confessor en tal caso deve amonestar al penitente, que se enmiende, y darle algunos exercicios sanctos, que se emplee, para divertirle de este peccado, como son rezar el Rosario de nuestra Señora, y algunos ayunos, y otros loables exercicios. Porque de esta manera podria ser, que se enmendasse, saliesse deste peccado. (660ab)

Centuries later, similar advice will be given to both onanists and homosexuals in the hope that they abandon their perverse ways. That an early seventeenth-century cleric like father Ledesma does so in this treatise speaks to the incipient revaluation of what, until recently, have been regarded as mere sins. In these matters then, the change from religious offense, to habit, to mental disease, and thus, to nature, may have been well under way as early as 1608. This ought not to be too surprising, after all, in his *Examen de ingenios* (1575), the physiologist Juan Huarte de San Juan had already taken some steps in this direction:

[T]iene clara habla, melosa; es blanco, de buenas carnes y blandas, y sin vello, y si alguno tiene es poco y dorado. Son los tales muy rubios, y hermosos de rostro. Pero su simiente dice Galeno que es aguanosa e inhábil para engendrar. Estos no son muy amigos de las mujeres, ni las mujeres de ellos. (622)

In the description of this sort of man, "el hombre frío y húmido" (622), one of the many types that naturally occur, we can already foresee what a nineteenth-century sexologist would later refer to as the invert.<sup>10</sup>

Although we have chosen to focus on the characterization of male homogenital activities, partly on account of the comparative abundance of material on sodomites as opposed to tribades, female homoerotic subjects, and partly on account of what are probably substantive differences in the evolution of these erotic choices, we ought not to be totally silent. Reproducing an anonymous poem from the *Jardín de Venus* series will help us illustrate this type of homogenital performance:

Hallándose dos damas en faldeta  
tratando del amor con mucha risa,  
se quitaron faldetas y camisa

por hacer más gustosa la burleta.  
 La una con la otra recio aprieta,  
 mas dales pena ver la carne lisa.  
 Entonces llegó Amor, con mucha prisa,  
 y puso entre las dos una saeta.  
 La una se apartó muy consolada  
 por haber ya labrado su provecho.  
 la otra se quedó con la agujeta.  
 Y como se miró, viéndose armada,  
 por el daño que el dómine había hecho  
 le puso por prisión una bragueta. (Alzieu 46)

More comical than satirical, this text is greatly revealing. The practice it depicts, as Mary Elizabeth Perry has discussed, is documented in Cristóbal de Chaves's *Relación de las cosas de la cárcel de Sevilla y su trato* (123, n.25):

Y habiendo muchas mujeres que [quieren] más ser hombres que lo que naturaleza les dio, se han castigado muchas que en la cárcel se han hecho gallos con un valdrés hecho en forma de natura de hombre, que atado con sus cintas se lo ponían; y han llevado por esto docientos azotes. (Alzieu 111, n.1)

Female homogenital acts, a "gustosa . . . burleta," appear in the sonnet as something that may very well happen between scantily dressed women when they are "tratando del amor con mucha risa." The naturalness that the enactment of this transgression presents is surprising if one bears in mind that in Gregorio López's gloss to Alfonso el Sabio's *Las siete partidas* such "burlas" are classified as instances of sodomy (Perry 125). Indeed, Perry informs us that "a woman who had used a false penis with other women was hanged in 1624 for 'robberies, murders, and audacity'" (125). Clearly, even if in a phallogentric way, poetical discourse offers an alternative and highly suggestive view of female homoeroticism.

Tracing enough marks of identity in burlesque poetry to tangibly demonstrate the presence of a queer subjectivity in Golden Age Spain may not be fully possible, even if approaching the task in a multidiscursive fashion. Fortunately for us, that should not be cause for dismay. As Valerie Traub argues as she advances the study of female homogenital representations in Shakespearean drama, that is not really the point: "[W]hatever the actual erotic practice of women historically, in terms of critical discourse female homoeroticism must be thought into existence" (96). The anxieties generated by sodomy in multiple discourses, the typification of sodomites and their habits, their representation—whether burlesque or sympathetic—, their legal persecution, etc. demand a similar effort on our part as readers and critics of literature. In the end, as Sinfield bluntly

puts it:

The point is hardly who did what with whom, but what was perceived as being done, and the anxieties that informed such perceptions. Sodomy was a continual threat around the edges of male bonding. It is not a matter of whether Coriolanus and Aufidius fucked, but of the text being unable, and perhaps unwilling, to dispel the ghost of such an inference. (19)

Espinel mollified Sevillian youths, Quevedo's hermits and Italians, Góngora's *mancebos afeminados* somewhere between Carrión and Tordesillas, and the naked *damas* and their *burleta*—not to mention Guzmán de Afarache's father, Catalina de Erauso autobiography, Cervantes's Licenciado Vidriera, *El Crotalón's* Julio and Julieta in the *Canto nono del gallo*, Lope de Vega's innumerable tantalizing transvestites and suspicious *galanes*, Tirso's disturbing Don Juan, Calderón's Rosaura, Moreto's *Lindo don Diego*, etc.—present us with similar challenges. At the risk of being accused of "seeing things," it is our duty and—hopefully our pleasure—to persevere "to 're-vision'"—to quote Traub once more—"and put into play those meanings that have been repressed, lost, or unspoken" (107).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The *OED* explains the etymology of "bugger" as a derivation of the French "bougre" originally used to refer to a "sect of heretics who came from Bulgaria in the 11th c., [and] afterwards to other 'heretics' (to whom abominable practices were ascribed), also to usurers" (627c). The conflation of sodomy, heresy, and usury is common during the Middle Ages. Whereas the sodomite went against nature and the divine order in his/her sexual practice, the usurer produced money (interest) out of lending money, a highly 'unnatural' operation. Non-procreative sexuality and the generation of income through non-productive transactions are seen as similarly abominable.

<sup>2</sup>Herrero García 366-70. In Mateo Alemán's picaresque novel, *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), both bestiality and sodomy are mentioned among the vices that prevailed in Italy. The narrator's father, a Genoese merchant, is also described as someone whose hairstyle and other mannerisms made suspect of sodomy. Cf. Mateo Alemán, *Guzmán de Alfarache*, (Barcelona: Planeta, 1983), 121-24. In a nutshell, as Juan Pérez de Montalbán has a character in his *Privilegio de mujeres* exclaim in disbelief: "¡Un hombre que es italiano / De mujeres tan amigo!" (Herrero García, n.p.) The French, often seen as the "proto-sodomite" themselves by the Spaniards, the English, and others also blamed the Italians on this front. As late as 1891, Doctor Albert Moll insisted on the historic preponderance of sodomy or *uranisme* in Italy. Explaining how the French accused the Italians of having introduced the practice in France in the mid 1560s in the entourage that accompanied Catherine de Medici and her son Charles IX of France, he quickly moves to



make such a prejudice his own: "Je considère comme démontré que l'uranisme a toujours été plus répandu en *Italie* que dans les autres pays d'Europe." Cf. Albert Moll 57.

<sup>3</sup>Ironically, as Trexler has demonstrated, Espinel's call for the moral and sexual regeneration of Sevillian youths under the sign of the primitive Vandals cannot free itself from a foundational homoerotic component: "I showed earlier that male homosexual activity was a punishment ancient Mediterranean and European men might inflict on those who violated their female property. (. . .) A second fundamental cause of male homosexual activity soon appears: quite apart from the stimulus of property, older males competed for and manifested their power by homosexually dominating younger ones. (. . .) [T]he gendered character of male political organizations is a reality that might seem impossible for scholars to ignore. The sexual subordination of young males may yet prove to be of comparable importance to the origins of patriarchy as is the rape of women, or even a reverse metal" (24, 30-31).

<sup>4</sup>I am grateful to Vern Williamsen for his gracious hospitality in Tucson during the summer of 1995 and for his gift of the microfilm from the Barberini collection at the Vatican Library which contains the Góngora sonnet in question.

<sup>5</sup>The use of the term "particular," as Alzieu and others explain in a discussion of the semantic charge of a name such as "Fuenterrabía," is not all innocent: "[S]u falso parentesco con «rabo» hizo de esta palabra una de las más empleadas en la literatura burlesca de asunto erótico (sodomía) o meramente escatológico (. . .) Lo mismo se podría decir de «rabel» (. . .) y otra familia también numerosa: «particular», «especular», «Culiseo», «calcular», «vincular», «circular», «caricular», ('culicantor'), y... «*secula seculorum*»" (251-52, n.19).

<sup>6</sup>According to Biruté Ciplijauskaitė, Góngora's text is a "[s]oneto construido con alusiones a relaciones homosexuales entre los tres mancebos con cuyos nombres juega, facilitándolo el hecho de que sean también nombres de lugares. Los tres apellidos son Carrión, Tordesillas y Olivares's" (304). Her opinion is also shared by Dan Heiple. Although I concur with their assessment, especially with respect to the implication of the Conde Duque de Olivares's in the in-group of sodomy in seventeenth-century Spain. *Privado* (court favorite) of Philip IV from 1622 through 1642, Olivares's name often appeared linked to his king's penchant for debauchery. Also in 1622 Góngora wrote a sonnet to the death of Juan de Tarsis, Conde de Villamediana, in whose murder Olivares was rumored to have been implicated. Villamediana's reputation as a sodomite and his attachment to the young Philip IV are common knowledge. Góngora's poem, as Ciplijauskaitė asserts, is one of the few in which "sentimos vibrar una emoción sincera" (29). As a member of the Andalusian aristocracy, Olivares accession to the real seat of power in Spain can be interpreted as a dangerous infiltration of the liminal into the central. Góngora's text then ought to be read in a plural fashion: an admixture of political commentary, personal invective, and social lampoon.

<sup>7</sup>"Esta categoría numerosa [italianos]—13,5% del total, proporción idéntica a la del clero regular—, y muy severamente reprimida por la Inquisición, estaba integrada exclusivamente por hombres pobres, aunque no en la miseria, soldados o marineros casi todos, gente errante que los naturales veían con gran recelo, y por lo tanto muy poco integrados en la sociedad levantina de entonces. Otras fuentes, menos de fiar y más prolijas, hablan para Madrid y Sevilla en particular,

de ricos italianos sodomitas de vida fastuosa, y pecadora por más de un concepto" (Carrasco 217).

<sup>8</sup>Hermits and monks were often suspect of so called unnatural persuasions, even within their own religious orders. The Rule of Saint Benedict which regulated the life of most male religious communities in the Middle Ages took very specific measures to insure that no sexual activity would take place between monks. These were required to sleep all in the same room, fully clothed, around the abbot's bed, with a light on, and making sure that *Adolescentiores fratres iuxta se non habeant lectos, sed permixti cum senioribus* (Adolescent brothers not have their beds next to each other, but interspersed between older brothers) to avoid the perils of youthful carnal indiscretions (Boswell 188 n. 69).

<sup>9</sup>I want to thank Dan Heiple for sharing with me his research on Pedro de Ledesma during our visit to the Biblioteca Nacional (Madrid) in the summer of 1995.

<sup>10</sup>Huarte's attempt to sort out what kind of activity is best suited to each type of man, according to his *ingenio*, appears to us as an early modern approach to eugenics. His plan would contemplate a national system that would make sure that each person work exclusively in the area best suited to him. In order to carry out this program, though, it is first necessary to know exactly how to distinguish between each type of *ingenio* and disposition. The key here is that all humans are either "sick" or "imperfectly sane" on account of *destemplanzas* due to diet, weather, etc.: "por razón de las destemplanzas que los hombres padecen, y por no tener entera su composición natural, están inclinados a gustos y apetitos contrarios, no solamente en la irascible y concupiscible, pero también en la parte racional" (172). This, of course, helps to explain all sorts of behaviors including that of the sodomites.

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