SUBVERSIVE SUPPLEMENTATION: CALDERÓN'S *LA DEVOCIÓN DE LA CRUZ*

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Between the signified and the signifier lies an elusive territory. Derridean deconstruction labels this space the *différance* and describes it as a never ending deferral of meaning in which words try in vain to recapture a presence beyond themselves, to establish a center within themselves. Meaning is always supplemented, first, by adding itself to an existing presence, thus creating a surplus, and second, by replacing or re-placing whatever it adds itself to. Each of these processes constitutes supplementarity. Both, though present in all discourse, are prominent in Calderon□s writings and will be the focus of this study.

In *La devoción de la cruz*, from the title to the closing stage directions, the sign of the Cross, or cross signs, abound. Few critics have supplemented the religious Cross with profane or mundane hermeneutics. W. J. Entwhistle, for example, suggests that the author's intention was to show that the smallest amount of faith in the Cross could save even the most pernicious sinners from damnation. Edwin Honig sees the Cross as a metaphor for salvation and as one of the principal devices that motivate the action of the drama. These critics have conducted their investigations by tacitly or explicitly interpreting the title to mean "devotion to the Cross, as," indeed, it has often been translated from Spanish to other languages. Thomas Austin O'Connor, however, sees a shifting in the meaning of *de*. There is an implicit *a los hombres* or *los hombres a* which has been excluded from the syntactic equation of the title and should be inserted after *cruz* or after *de* respectively. O'Connor senses that previous critics focus too heavily on the devotion of humans, particularly of Eusebio, to the Cross. He suggests that the flow of devotion between God and humans can be reversed to foreground the love of God for humankind rather than the zeal of humankind for the Cross. This would imply that an equally valid English translation of the title would be *The Devotion of the Cross*, thus emphasizing the love of Christ for humankind. Entwhistle and Honig seem to envision the Cross in a metonymic relationship with Christ; O'Connor's evaluation appears to describe a metaphoric association between Christ and the Cross, one that, indeed, becomes especially apparent at the close of the play. I am not interested, however, in championing any particular one of these interpretations—not that each of them does not have validity. Rather, what fascinates me are the supplemental additions and replacements of signification that occur throughout the work, in other words, the textuality, the gaps that allow

these critics and others to arrive at differing conclusions.

The first cross that attracts my attention is not a Holy Cross with a capital *C*, but rather a crossroads–or a crossbreed, a hybrid–of the profane and the sacred. Unlike a great number of Calderonian plays that tend to begin with a main character, *La devoción de la cruz* leads off with a curious conversation between the graciosos, Menga and Gil:

> MENGA. ¡Verá por do va la burra!
> GIL. Jo, demonio; jo, mohina.
> MENGA. Ya verás por do camina: Arre acá.
> GIL. ¡El diablo te aburra!
> ¿No hay quien una cola tenga,
> pudiendo tenerla mil? (11)

The stage directions inform us that this scene occurs in a small grove of trees just to the edge of a road that leads to Sena. A straightforward interpretation may indicate that Menga is riding a donkey that she is unable to control. The donkey wanders from the road and gets stuck in the mud. At the same time, however, the influence of the words *devotion* and *Cross* in the title encourages reflection upon a possible intertext of another more sacred story that begins with the entrance of a pregnant woman on a donkey and of a frustrated man walking beside her into the city of Bethlehem. A closer look–with a bit of a deviant eye–reveals another important supplement. It is possible to interpret this "wandering from the path" as either a forbidden or a failed sexual experience.

Although several critics mention the threat of incest between Eusebio and Julia, little has been done to expose the elements of taboo in this play. The threat of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships is a constant throughout Golden Age *comedias*, but non-consanguineal, heterosexual relations are assumed to be "natural," traditional. "Unnatural" relationships in literature might symbolize the destabilization of society and could run the risk of censorship if they did not conform to the exigencies of the patriarchal order.

In his *jácaras* and *entremeses* Calderón regularly flirts with the forbidden. In the first four lines of the "Jácara de Carrasco," Carrasco ingeniously blends the sacred and the profane: "Loado sea el hijo de Dios, / y a quien no dijere amén, / soga le dé, como a mí / suele, un ministro del Rey" (328). The "soga" administered by the king's minister, is later referred to as a "cordel" which, applied in very thick strokes to his backside, caused him to spout blood. This could be a brutal image were it not couched in jocular discourse. Although there is certainly a

reference to physical punishments that were perhaps unjustly executed, there is also a possible allusion to sodomy, especially in conjunction with the other erotic signs. La Perez seems to serve as a sexual image, a devouring fire able to satisfy multitudes; yet, Pérez claims, there is a problem with Carrasco: "Quejoso tengo a Carrasco; / y aunque lo hice mal con él, / "pardiez, que no pude más, / embarazada con diez!" (329). *Embarazada* might mean "inconvenienced," but the sexual implication cannot be ignored. One can only imagine what "lo hice mal con él," what "no pude más," or what "embarazada con diez" might signify; the conclusions, however, may suggest an erotic climax. The rapid release of tension in the final lines reverses the swift rise of pressure evident at the beginning. The first and last lines have parallel pacific tones: the first suggests spiritual serenity; the last, corporeal contentment.

In the *entremés* "Don Pegote," a page enters with a letter. Don Pegote, an effeminate gentleman, immediately asks "¿Cuyo?" (114), a non-accented, masculine noun meaning "male lover," not "cúyo," the accented, interrogative pronoun. Don Pegote is quickly informed that the paper comes from Doña Quinola. He immediately responds: "Celos serán, sí, pene y calle, / que gloria es el penar por este talle" (114). "Celos," of course, can refer to "to feelings of a female in heat," to "desires," to "carefulness, watchfulness," or to "jealousy." "Pene y calle" can be interpreted either as conjoined verbs or nouns. Likewise "penar" and "talle" have various interpretations. As with the figure of the Cross, I do not suggest that one reading is better than another, but it seems reasonable to entertain a sexually subversive reading, one which represents Don Carrasco not merely as Doña Quinola's toy, but as man with feminine sex traits. For example, when Carrasco visits his alleged lover and she asks for money, he replies, "Daca tras, niño, caca, caca." The suggestive nature of this remark is reinforced by the action as roles are reversed and Don Carrasco's body, especially his behind, becomes the recipient of numerous pricks inflicted by his accuser's knitting needles.

In *La devoción de la cruz*, Gil's initial encounter with Menga can also be turned upside down, revealing a similar homoerotic, forbidden suggestiveness. *Burra*, among other things, signifies a woman "laboriosa y de mucho aguante," hence *burra* becomes a sign for *woman* and perhaps for *insatiability*. Maybe Gil and Menga have deliberately gone into the woods to attempt to satisfy Menga's rapacious desire. Gil petitions her to stop, using commands customarily directed at horses. He complains, "No puede mi fuerza sola" (11) Menga responds, "Yo tiraré de la cola, / tira tú de las orejas" (11). Even these efforts do not

accomplish the task; Menga leaves to look for help since Gil seems to work with "such little enthusiasm" ("tan pocas mañas," 13). Gil is not up to Menga□s task. Perhaps he has difficulties keeping his mind on the job. Preoccupation with sexual activities is conventional of *graciosos*; Gil, however, seems to be more attracted to Eusebio than to his female comic counterpart. When Menga later tells him that a young woman went up Eusebio's mountain a maiden and came back down a mistress, Gil promptly replies, "Conmigo fuera cruel / que también entro doncel, / y pudiera salir dueño" (46). Later, like Don Pegote, he will also be pricked all over his body as he hides from Eusebio in a bramble bush. Perhaps, then, he is not entirely inclined to satisfy Menga. The animal stuck in the mud, a "mohina," is cross between a male horse and a female donkey; like the mule, it is an animal incapable of breeding, being neither male nor female. Similar to the "mohina," Gil seems not entirely male, although he is obviously not female either. Like a mule, he is unable to reproduce, or, at least, it would appear, to copulate. The inability to consummate union, to establish a cross, is reflected throughout the play. Curcio's disbelief of his role in his wife's pregnancy, Eusebio's flight from Julia, and Julia's rejection of her Husband all signal a lack of synthesis.

Lisardo's dead body also prevents Julia and Eusebio from crossing paths, both by its physical presence and by its moral implications to Julia. Yet, as Honig suggests, the corpse serves as the center of a visual cross sign, a Cross which can variously signify "suffering," "protection," and even, perhaps, "salvation," if we consider the role of Lisardo's prayers on behalf of Eusebio as well as the confession and repentance enacted by Julia. The visual presence of a crucifix, in fact, accompanies each miscarried attempt to establish unity: Curcio's rejection of his wife's supplications occurs under the arms of an actual wooden cross; Julia's escape from the convent (itself a Cross, probably both in its architectural structure and in its function as a place of mediation between God and Woman) and Eusebio's furious flight are all provoked by the Crosses burned on the twins□ chests and accomplished with the aid of a vertical ladder placed against the horizontal convent walls, not to mention the two thieves who flanked each side of the ladder. Even the tail of Gil and Menga's donkey evokes a visual Cross as it rises alone above the mud.

Perhaps the donkey's raised tail also signifies an opportunity for escape from the filth of the world. Gil, oblivious to the possible religious correlation, continues to wallow in physical appetites. According to my upside down interpretation, Gil attempts to compensate for his sexual

impotence by diverting Menga's attention away from the donkey's tail, a reminder, perhaps, of his own unresponsive appendage. Gil recounts a similar situation that he was able to resolve by relying upon two horses (strong, virile, sexual symbols) to perform the job and suggests that he and Menga attempt a similar solution in their present predicament. He states: "Menga, yo siento / ver un animal hambriento, / donde hay animales hartos" (12). Gil's explanation seems to suggest that their problems could be resolved by resorting to cuckoldry; in fact, Menga's earlier suggestion that Gil grab the ears and she the "cola" could support this interpretation: one of the significations of *orejas* is *cuernos*. Thus, while Menga is grabbing behinds, Gil will grab his own horns.

As the impatient Menga runs off for help, Gil vocalizes his awkward plight in an address literally directed to the donkey, but figuratively reflecting Menga. The endearing use of the second person familiar voice and of diminutives as well as the employment of multiple ambiguities easily suggests alternative readings. A carnivalesque rendering may seek to explore the limits of lechery. Gil seems to attribute a generosity of sexual appetite to Menga, implying that she is willing even to share her clients with others.

Although this somewhat subversive interpretation certainly re-places the meaning of the text, it does not wander excessively from traditional Spanish themes. Strands of profane love mixed with heavenly love weave a text that stretches from the Middle Ages to the Golden Age and beyond. *El libro de buen amor*, for example, is one of the first major attempts to demonstrate how worldly love can lead to or be supplanted by a heavenly love, emphasizing that both types of love are necessary if not "good." Calderón, like Juan Ruiz, was familiar with the Bible and with Catholic dogma, as well as with the inclinations and customs of humankind. Like the Archpriest, Calderón knits the profane and the sacred tightly together. In addition to the possible allusion to Joseph and Mary in the opening scene, the text can yield other pious readings. For example, the burro's descent into the mud may represent the animalistic nature of Eusebio and of the wordly Julia and of their fall into the filth of the world. Gil's acknowledgement of his incapacity to pull the burro out by himself manifests human limitations and the need for a Savior in order to extract Eusebio and Julia from their plight. Gil's soliloquy can also be reinterpreted, perhaps, as a foreshadowing of Lisardo's lament upon discovering Eusebio's letters in Julia's dresser. Julia, unlike the Menga of my deviant reading, was truly chaste, virtuous, and reserved; in summary, a "good" virgin, a model of Mary before Eusebio crossed her path. If we view the reverential interpretations as creating a vertical

relationship between God and humans, and if we visualize the carnivalized explanations as horizontal associations between humans and their appetites--remembering, all the while, the literal interpretations of the texts and perhaps assigning them the metaphoric function of lashing that ties the vertical and horizontal arms together--then we have constructed a Cross, which, like the Cross of Christ, represents the place where God and humans meet. The Cross may represent the symbiosis of Christ, the Son of God, capable of overcoming sin, and Christ, the son of the woman Mary, susceptible to temptation. Like the conjoined timbers, the cross sign in *La devoción de la cruz* presents itself in various ways, each of which demonstrates both the ability to mix the profane with the sacred and the inability to stabilize meaning.

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