

PROFANING THE RELIGIOUS: TWO NICKNAMES IN *DOÑA PERFECTA*

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One of the nicknames in *Doña Perfecta* has been completely studied. Stephen Gilman has shown how rich in meaning is the sobriquet “Licurgo” (for Pedro Lucas), and why it is a good artistic change from an earlier one in Galdós’s Alpha MS (380-81). The aim of the present study is to continue the elucidation of the nicknames in *Doña Perfecta* by focusing on “Suspiritos” (for María Remedios Tinieblas) and “Cirio Pascual” (for Nicolás Hernández) in order to show that they are also richer than a preliminary reading might suggest, and that they contribute to Galdós’s successful artistry in *Doña Perfecta*.

Both nicknames are the invention of the aggressively mischievous Troya sisters, who “ponían motes a todo viviente de Orbajosa, desde el Obispo hasta el último zascandil” (XII, 83). Wifredo de Ráfols has stated that “the three Troya sisters are earthly versions of the three sisters of Greek mythology, the Fates, in the following respects: Like Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the Troya sisters spend their days sewing, singing, and playing tricks. [. . .]. As frivolous parodies of the Fates, the three Troya sisters not only mock, but in a sense also control the destinies of all Orbajosenses by dispensing each a suitable epithet” (479-80).

When Pepe Rey hears the Troyas referring to their next-door neighbor as “Suspiritos,” he inquires about the origin of the nickname. “Suspiritos” came by her name, the girls say, “porque siempre que habla suspira entre palabra y palabra, y aunque de nada carece, siempre se está lamentando” (XIII, 87-88). Neither Pepe nor the narrator pick up and use this appellation, but Pepe confirms that he understands the reason behind it when he makes reference to “esa señora de los suspiros” (XIII, 88). Although María Remedios never gives any indication that she has knowledge of her nickname, she does show insight concerning its justification when she says, “Soy [. . .] muy llorona, muy suspirosa” (XXVII, 176). Equally insightful, from a different perspective, is Don Inocencio. He reveals in the chapter entitled “El tormento de un canónigo” that one of his great burdens has been to tolerate Remedio’s “estar suspirando [siempre] a moca y baba diez años” (XXVII, 177).

Ráfols judges María Remedios to be a “caricature of the obsessed mother, preoccupied with nothing but her son’s economic well-being. [. . .], while her propensity for sighing and dressing in black is a measure of her despondency” (480). Thus María Remedios’s apodo is a good example of how a Galdosian nickname can be “an inseparable possession or an attribute of the personaje [. . .] and more often than not corresponds to his or her function in the novel” (Bell 1) . However, there is yet another dimension to the caricature, which is not mentioned by Ráfols, if one remembers that one of the distinctive attributes of the Virgin Mary is that of intermediary of sighs and laments.¹ To Mary in heaven, who is perpetually sighing and lamenting concerning the fate of her son, believers on earth offer up to her in prayers and hymns² their own sighs and laments, which she can convey to God. Thus one of Mary’s titles is Nuestra Señora Medianera del Suspiro.³ Significantly, Galdós gives seven instances of his villainous character’s sighing and

lamenting—the same number as Mary’s seven sorrows, often depicted in painting, sculpture—and referenced in *Fortunata y Jacinta* (I, vii, 1:266)—as seven daggers in her heart.⁴

Doña Perfecta was always on the Church’s former *Index of Prohibited Books* (and some of my classmates, I remember from undergraduate days, had to obtain written ecclesiastical permission to read this novel). Giving María Remedios, Galdós’s pivotal character, who so insistently works behind the scene to bring about Pepe Rey’s death, the insinuating nickname of “Suspiritos” is remarkable. And when coupled with precisely seven instances of this villainous character’s sighing and lamenting, one may extrapolate that this aspect of the novel alone might suffice for its inclusion in the *Index*, which held that “all books are forbidden that insult [. . .] the Blessed Virgin Mary” (*Index* 15). Would Galdós go so far as to create for his elitist reader a subtext parody with Remedio’s concern for her son of the Virgin’s sighing and lamenting over the fate of her son, Jesus?

In giving an affirmative answer to this question, it is helpful to remember that *Doña Perfecta* began appearing serially in 1870 at the very time when the Cortes was furiously debating whether or not to reestablish Catholicism as the official state religion. It was also a time when Catholic apologists, including Pope Pius IX, were describing the Church as a “societas perfecta” (Cueto 164). Certainly the clergy was not off limits for Galdós, whose nation had just concluded its second nineteenth-century civil war between liberal and conservative opponents. Thus in *Doña Perfecta* both the priest at Naharilla (XXII, 147-48) and Don Inocencio are shown as guilty of inciting to armed insurrection. Most importantly, Don Inocencio has major culpability—along with Perfecta—in the murder of Pepe Rey, the young liberal, well-educated male protagonist, who could do much for the future of Spain. Moreover, the following year in *Gloria*, Galdós will attack Pius IX himself by means of his characterization of Gloria’s father, Juan de Lantigua (Chamberlin 10-11). Pius IX repeatedly invoked the Virgin in his fight against liberal ideas, and even christened his principal gunboat “The Immaculate Conception” (Cueto 164).⁵ Thus Galdós was not the first to have recourse to the Virgin in the polemics of his time; rather he was responding to an aggressive—and longtime—Church campaign, which included the promulgation of the Immaculate Conception as dogma (1854), the Encyclical “Quanta Cura” with its attached “Syllabus of Errors” (1864),⁶ and the first Vatican Council (1870), at which Pius IX also had himself declared infallible.

Our second sobriquet, “Cirio Pascual,” is also invented and applied by the Troyas, as they respond to a dare (by Juan Tafetán) and they shout it out the window at the passerby Nicolás Hernández. Because there is no explanation by the Troyas for this nickname, one must look elsewhere in Galdós’s text for insights. Significantly, Don Benito’s narrator tells us that the Troyas sister not only “se vestían de máscaras en Carnaval para meterse en las casas más alcorniadas,” but also enjoyed throwing “piedrecitas a los transeúntes” (XII, 83). Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance the hurling of not only objects, but also of insults was a major feature of Carnival (21).⁷ Moreover, since the pre-Christian antecedents of Carnival were concerned with the death of winter and the

rebirth of spring, there was great emphasis, during Carnival's topsy-turvy time of antiestablishment revolt, on destroying the old and fertilizing the new. Thus, in earlier times excrement was a favorite object to be hurled about, as well as insults with denigrating and annihilating intent (Morson and Emerson 443-44). Because of the emphasis on the death-fertilization-rebirth cycle, the lower part of the human anatomy received much attention, with sexuality and sexual organs in no way neglected (Bakhtin 21). Although the Troya sisters, in the second half of the nineteenth century, throw only pebbles and orange peels, the nickname which the girls hurl at Nicolás Hernández has not been correspondingly attenuated. Because of its length and diameter, the Holy Saturday Candle early on became "uno de los eufemismos jocosos frecuentes" for a very large phallus (Alonso Hernández 204).

Galdós's, of course, was not the first Spanish author to use the euphemism "cirio pascual" in creative fiction. This usage has been documented as early as *La lozana andaluza* (1528): "[L]a hornera que está allí, y dice que traxo a su hija virgín a Roma, salvo que con el palo o cabo de la pala la desvirgó; y miente que el sacristán con el cirio pascual se lo abrió" (*Lozana* XVII, cited in Alonso Hernández 204). This same meaning for "cirio pascual" is confirmed by Gillet in Torres Naharro's *Comedia Calamita*, where he also reminds us that in Judeo-Spanish "Kandela" is used for the male member (Gillet II, 654, n. 136). Cela, in his *Dictionary secreto*, cites other examples for "cirio pascual," including Quevedo's "Sátira a una mujer, que viéndole enamorado, se casó con un capón" (II, 330).

The erotic implications of "cirio pascual" most likely began in an officially sanctioned Church custom, known as *Risus paschalis* (Easter Laughter), which existed for nearly twelve centuries throughout Europe (Jacobelli 59). "Después de la tristeza de la larga cuaresma [sin sexo]," there was on Easter Sunday, within the Church sanctuary and in the religious service itself, including the sermon, much that recalled Carnival—"porque en caso contrario los predicadores hablarían en templos vacíos" (Ecolampadio cited in Jacobelli 26). Even the present Holy Father, Benedict XVI (before his elevation to the Papacy) has commented favorably concerning the former custom of *Risus paschalis* (Ratzinger 100). He does not mention, understandably, that the *Risus paschalis* also had a pagan, pre-Christian substratum. Laughter in primitive societies is often a metaphor for both the sexual act and sexual pleasure (Jacobelli 82-83, 91). Because Easter (whose very name derives from the springtime pagan goddess Osara) coincides with the rebirth of nature, eroticism was often present—as it still is to this day—in the Hebrew Passover liturgy.⁸ Christian records show that phallic symbols were sometimes joyfully exhibited and copulation simulated as part of the *Risus paschalis* (Jacobelli 48-49, 70). During this activity, whose basic tenet was that the more laughter produced the better, sometimes almost nothing was off limits. An employment of the largest candle in the church, the "Cirio Pascual," was, most likely among those "allerheiligsten Dingen" (the holiest of things) used to delight the congregants with "Derbheiten" (ribaldry) and "Obszönitäten (obscenities) on Easter Morning (Fluck 210),⁹ "mientras el sacerdote ridiculizaba las cosas más sagradas" (Jacobelli 50).

Galdós's narrator does not tell why this nickname "tanto le hacía rabiar [a Nicolás Hernández]." However, if the well-known connotation of the *mote* "Cirio Pascual" itself were not enough to make Hernández furious, he might remember that the Paschal Candle is used continually at Mass from Easter to Pentecost, and consequently progressively diminishes in size—until it is retired from service for the remaining 315 days each year. If the Troya sisters (acting in the Carnival tradition of hurling denigrating and annihilatory insults) might indeed have fateful power in their nicknaming, as Ráfols suggests, the *mote* "Cirio Pascual" might even have worrisome libidinal connotations for the nickname. In any case, "Cirio Pascual" is the only one of the Troyas's nicknames that they do not choose to explain. However, it was probably understood by the elitist reader of Galdós's time, though it has yet to be annotated in any edition of *Doña Perfecta*.

Significantly, the nicknames "Suspiritos" and "Cirio Pascual" do not appear in the 1896 reworking of *Doña Perfecta* for the public stage. Nine years before the drama, one sees in *Fortunata y Jacinta* that Galdós knew how easily Spanish sensibility could be offended by any criticism of the Virgin Mary. Accordingly, the unorthodox religious ideas that Juan Pablo Rubín expounds on Madrid's nightly café scene are tolerated, but when he expresses "algunas reticencias desfavorables a la reputación de la Virgen María," a veritable donny-brook ensues, the owner forcefully intervenes, and Juan Pablo has to "[trasladar] sus reales a otro café" (III, i,4:33). Thus when Galdós adapted *Doña Perfecta* to the Spanish stage, twenty years after his novel, and financial gain had become a consideration, he knew it would not be helpful to retain a nickname that might suggest a parody of Mary's sighing for the loss of her son Jesus. Thus María Remedios has no nickname at all and she sighs only once—the same number of times as do Pepe Rey and Rosario. Moreover, Galdós omits the Troya sisters and thus has no one shouting "Cirio Pascual" from the Spanish stage. Even with these changes, the presentation on the traveling circuit was perilous. We know from the letters of Emilio Mauro to Galdós that in the rural North local priests fulminated from the pulpit against the drama. And Mauro's company usually performed the other plays in their repertoire first, saving *Doña Perfecta* until the last night in case that they had to leave town in order to avoid going to jail (Ortega 396).

In its review of the stage premiere of *Doña Perfecta*, *La Unión Católica* railed: "No es más que una obra de propaganda librepensadora y librecultista [. . .], aunque con algunas atenuaciones de la novela del mismo título" (cited in Gullón 163). *La Unión Católica*, understandably, does not specifically mention among the "algunas atenuaciones" the nicknames "Suspiritos" and "Cirio Pascual," nor, of course, does it state that they were appropriate for the novel and not for the drama.

NOTES

¹ I am indebted for this information to Thomas R. Franz (Ohio U).

² For example, the hymn *Salve Regina* states, “Ad te suspiramos gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle” (“To the, we do send up our sighs, mourning, and weeping in this valley of tears.”) (3). This English wording is to be found in the prayer, “Hail Holy Queen,” which is part of the Rosary. Additionally, Pope John Paul II, who was deeply devoted to the Virgin Mary, said that she “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (*Ecumenical Trends* 1).

³ This attribute of the Virgin is reflected in Cartagena, Chile’s down-town church, *Nuestra Señora Medianera del Suspiro*, as well as in the rural image of *La venerada imagen de los Suspiros*.

⁴ Guillermina Pacheco asserts, “El día aquel fue un día de prueba para mí. Era un viernes de Dolores y las siete espadas [. . .] estaban clavadas aquí (I,vii,1:266).

⁵ Cueto says that when it was noticed that French-imported canon for the gunboat were inscribed *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, they were thrown overboard (169, n.18).

⁶ This dogma also reiterated the idea of original sin and condemned by implication the liberal idea of the perfectibility of Man, along with his hopes for a better society (Cueto 162).

⁷ It is a pleasure to thank Margot Versteeg (Univ. of Kansas) for calling my attention to Bakhtin.

⁸ The Passover liturgy includes the “Song of Songs” (often called the “Song of Solomon”). For details of this very sensuous poem, see “The Song of Songs,” *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1900ed; and the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. 2003 ed.

⁹ The use of symbols was an amelioration of previous circumstance: “[R]epasando los documentos, se nota una extinción progresiva del componente más obviamente obsceno: el sacerdote *ya no actúa*, no muestra los genitales para hacer reír a los fieles” (Jacobelli 72; cf 170). Such obscenities within the Church brought censure not only from the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, but also from the Counter Reformation’s Council of Trent—after which the excesses of *Risus paschalis* became noticeably lessened in Catholic areas bordering Protestantism. Although some Lutheran pastors retained the custom of *Risus paschalis*, others used it as ammunition for anti-Catholic sermons and pamphlets. Eventually there was a general tendency for Lutheran clergy, if they kept the custom, to move the *Ostergelächter* (Easter Laughter) outside the church building—where women were allowed to dance and the pastor joined the merry-makers (Lippert 419).

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