



### **A Biblical Intertextuality: Wealth and Power in “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” de Francisco de Quevedo**

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The Judeo-Christian scriptures, commonly known as the Bible, have been a principal source and resource in Spanish and Latin American literature. There is an immense number of editions, studies, and critical analysis dedicated to the literary works of Francisco de Quevedo. However, there is a need for an analysis of the biblical influences and interconnectedness in Quevedo's *letrilla* “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero.” Therefore, this paper proposes an analysis of the biblical intertextuality in “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” with respect to the following biblical texts: Isaiah, Proverbs, Hosea, among other Holy Scriptures.

Francisco Gómez de Quevedo y Villegas is one of the eminent writers of Spain's Golden Age. As Natalio Fernández Marcos states in his article “¿Quevedo hebraísta? Lágrimas de Hieremías Castellanas,” Quevedo acquired four classical languages while studying humanities and philosophy at the University of Alcalá de Henares. In 1600, he moved to Valladolid and studied theology, a move that would significantly reframe Quevedo's personal and authorial perspectives. As was often the case with Spanish writers, the Bible inspired and served as understructure for many of Quevedo's works. He is considered by Marciano Martín Pérez and Raimundo Lida,

among others, to have great understanding of the Holy Scriptures. Pablo Antonio de Tarsia, in his *Vida de don Francisco de Quevedo*, writes:

Con letras humanas juntó las divinas, porque fuera del grado que consiguió en la Teología, hizo particular estudio en la Sagrada Escritura y en los Padres de la Iglesia como bien se divisa en la Vida del gran doctor de las gentes San Pablo y en otras obras espirituales que compuso, particularmente en *La Política de Dios y gobierno de Cristo*. (747)

According to Martín Pérez, Quevedo not only infused biblical contents and concepts into his literary work, but he also went even further, translating and developing commentary on specific books of the Bible. Martín Pérez states:

Para Quevedo el recurso a la Biblia constituyó una segura base doctrinal en medio de las dudas y de las encontradas opiniones de los teólogos . . . el comentario bíblico, la glosa del texto sagrado, le sirvió idealmente de hilo conductor para la exposición de su ideario . . . Existen libros que se ha traducido, al menos en parte, como el *Cantar de los cantares*; hay

otros que, además de traducidos, han sido también comentados por el, todo o en fragmentos: así el *Libro de Job* y las *Lamentaciones de Jeremías*. Libros sagrados hay, por fin, que Quevedo ha utilizado ampliamente, si no en trabajos exegéticos, sí en obras de otro carácter, como los *Hechos de los Apóstoles en su Vida de San Pablo* o los *Evangélicos en la Política de Dios*. (65)

In *Sobre la Religión Política de Quevedo*, Lida elaborates regarding the biblical intertextuality and says, “Ahora, en la *Política de Dios*, la Biblia será ciertamente la base infalible que don Francisco de Quevedo escoja para sus meditaciones sobre el príncipe, sobre sus deberes para con Dios, para consigo mismo y para con la república...” (202). Lida comments further on the intertextuality and states that Quevedo, in *La Política de Dios*, very closely refers to the apostles Paul and John regarding the spiritual fight: “¡Grande batalla! Dios con el mundo, el Espíritu con la carne, la verdad con la presunción, la Iglesia con los Príncipes y Señores del mundo” (207). Ignacio Arellano claims that many of Quevedo’s writing are inspired by the Bible and says, “Muchos de los escritos quevedianos parten de la Biblia, glosan pasajes, traducen o parafrasen determinados libros de la Sagrada Escritura o articulan su estructura en el marco de la exégesis o el comentario bíblico” (17). The scholar further comments on the biblical intertextuality regarding Quevedo’s works: “Una categoría sencilla de intertextualidad bíblica es el de la evocación de un microtexto que confiere cierta transcendencia religiosa a un texto moral” (19). He also emphasizes that the biblical influence and intertextuality are evident in the moral poetry and argues, “En todo este territorio de la poesía moral que estoy examinando rara vez, como se ve, un texto de la Biblia estructura globalmente un poema, o constituye su núcleo, pero la

intertextualidad bíblica es omnipresente” (28).

In recent years, many scholars have turned their attention to Quevedo’s religious literary works and the biblical intertextuality, translation, and interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. Quevedo wrote extensively about the Old and New Testaments; in particular, he wrote about the books of Job, Jonas, Psalms, the parables, biblical episodes, and some well-known biblical characters such as David, Pilatus, Judas, Adan, the apostles, among others. According to Arellano, “En la poesía religiosa las Sagradas Escrituras ocupan ya un lugar central, no solo como fuente de inspiración de motivos aislados o al servicio de otros componentes, sino como tema de composiciones completas, paráfrasis y traducciones, o glosas y recreaciones varias” (33). There is a selection of poems inspired by the New Testament and many other important texts regarding biblical episodes. One of the well-known poems is about King Baltazar in which he drinks in the sacred cup, a biblical reference to the book of Daniel 5.1.

“Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” is a poetic work that highlights Quevedo’s original, almost dazzling, cerebral and rhetorical ability. The poem is a recombination of multiple dimensions—financial, moral, theological, philosophical, political, national, and universal—for the purpose of satirical polemic. Burning beneath Quevedo’s poem-polemic was a grieving rejoinder at Spain’s political and moral decay, which can certainly be felt at moments in the poem. Certain textual clarification is necessary before the work can be approached critically. The *letrilla* is a satire, composed of ten stanzas, with verses of eight syllables, except the last one of each verse that is of five syllables. It has a perfect rhyme of ABBAACCC.

Quevedo’s *letrilla* brings forth the topic of the love of money, power, and the pursuit of material goods in the Spanish society of

his time. Many critics have addressed Quevedo's critics and disdain regarding the degeneration of seventeenth-century Spanish society. Elias Rivers, for example, reflects on Quevedo's concerns and states:

Quevedo looked back upon what he saw as the pre-imperial simplicity of medieval society, and took it to be the only possible antidote for the baroque sophistication of his contemporary world: like the Hebrew prophet, he considered it his religious duty to denounce the idolatry of his people, now whoring after strange gods; he yearned for a primitive virtue which had been lost, a simple society of brave warriors and fancy foods, without perfumes and frilly laces, without aristocratic vanity and indolence, without frivolous entertainments of all sorts. (17-18)

Certainly, in the passage above, Rivers describes Quevedo's worries and disappointment in Spain's love for material goods, moving away from God's teachings and traditions. It is imperative that in analyzing Quevedo's writings, we must situate them in their historical context, including their social, political, and cultural contexts. The social, cultural, and economic changes in Spain disturb and frustrate Quevedo. In fact, Quevedo witnesses Spain becoming a country of consumption of goods and lovers of money. For Quevedo, Spaniards are moving toward a materialist society and thus problematic and polemic. John Beverly states, "La transición del feudalismo (o de otras formaciones pre-capitalistas) al capitalismo, siempre y cuando ocurre, da lugar a una problemática ética y epistemológica sobre la naturaleza del valor económico y las metas de la producción y circulación de la riqueza" (102). Beverly continues to elaborate regarding the economic transition in Spain:

El oro americano y la consecuente inflación de precios a lo largo del siglo XVI darán una agudeza especial al tema del dinero. Tomemos como ejemplo la letrilla 'Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero' de Quevedo. El estribillo que sirve de título es evidentemente un oxímoron, subrayado por la consonancia de caballero y dinero. Ser caballero, usar el título de don, significa para Quevedo, como representante de una supuesta legitimidad, aristocrática, poseer una calidad estamental de nobleza intrínseca a la 'sangre' o línea familiar . . . Quevedo alude a la costumbre de vender títulos de honor a burgueses ricos. El dinero parece todopoderoso, sugiere Quevedo; pero sólo puede comprar la apariencia y no la esencia de la nobleza. (103)

The changes in seventeenth-century society are echoed by Grant McCracken, and he calls this phenomenon a "displacement effect" in a materialistic society. Although this is a general statement and not specifically related to Spain, it does apply to the concept of materialism in the Spanish society of Quevedo's time:

The displacement effect prevents Western economies from controlling impulses that drive them and from taking control of the motive forces from which they draw their social energy. Hitherto, these aspects of consumption have been dismissed as simple greed and irrationality. According to the usual account, consumers buy luxuries for goods because they are prisoners of extravagance. They are captives of irrational appetites. Thus, speaks of a traditional view. In point of fact, the matter is more complicated and, perhaps, somehow less unworthy. Our taste for luxuries, for good beyond our conventional buying power, is not simply greed, not only self-indulgence. It is also attributed to our need, as groups

and as individuals, to re-establish access to the ideals we have displayed to distant locations in time and space. (116)

Interestingly, the poem’s title, “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero,” has become a proverb or quip when referring to the power potential of money and, even more so, its corruptive and destructive potential. Quevedo, in a somewhat menacing linguistic twist, applied a title of Spanish nobility (“Don”) to money (“Don Dinero”). This play on words needles us with a deeper question, “Does money corrupt those in power or do those in power corrupt money?” Regardless of how one answers that question, we can see, at the very least, Quevedo is needling us to ask that question at most, he is provoking us with his own answer to that question.

The economic and political changes and the importance of acquiring money in Quevedo’s Spain illustrated capitalism’s advance across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a result, human labor value took on startling new definitions, measures, and applications. Of all the political, cultural, and moral disappointments Quevedo felt about his country, perhaps this, the human factor, is the one that kept grinding on him the most—especially as a theologian and a man framed in the Judeo-Christian ideal. In his paper “La religión política de Quevedo,” Lida comments, “En la constelación de ideas afines\_\_herejía, ateísmo, maquiavelismo, mala razón de estado\_\_ que tan prontas tiene siempre Quevedo para agredir a los enemigos de España, viene pues a incorporarse el dinerismo . . . ¿Capitalismo *avant la lettre*?” (211). As a theologian and a nationalist, Quevedo makes clear his disgust regarding the direction that Spain is going by abandoning their traditions and values. Quevedo demonstrates anxiety and even fear regarding these changes, and José Antonio Maravall states, “Quevedo, no doubt, felt this fear of changes. His famous “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” attests

to his preoccupation with the effects of emerging capitalism on the established social order” (6). Mark J. Mascia, in his paper titled “Paradigms of National Identity in Francisco de Quevedo’s Poetry: Los (de) Engaños de la Grandeza,” points out, “Quevedo’s nationalism also evinces contempt for money and specially the riches plundered from Latin America, a scorn for avarice and specially the corrupting effects of the colonial wealth” (68). Such sentiment is present in Quevedo’s *letrilla* “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero”:

Nace en las Indias honrado,  
donde el mundo le acompaña;  
viene a morir en España,  
y es en Génova enterrado.  
Y pues quien le trae al lado  
es hermoso, aunque sea fiero,  
poderoso caballero  
es don Dinero. (Lines 9-16)

These themes lead us into the focus of our study: Quevedo’s use of the Bible in “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero.” With a quasi-comedic and brooding sarcasm, the writer draws the reader into the chastising crucible of a preeminent biblical concern: the love of money and its inseparable escort, the lust for power. Additionally, but not surprisingly, “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” is structurally identical to some of the homilies of the Old Testament prophets—which were also sometimes sarcastic, poetic, brooding, and sharply polemical.

As mentioned, the purpose of this work, therefore, is to illuminate the distinct parallels, intertextuality and even identicalities, between “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” and precedents in the Bible. The ultimate hope is that we, too, might come away with mindful takeaways on this powerful man, Don Dinero.

### Top to Bottom Naming, Prequel, and Outcome

The first parallel that seems to emerge between “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” and the Judeo-Christian scriptures is what we might call *top to bottom naming*. Quevedo spares no person or profession in society when satirizing how Sir Money games (manipulates) and tames (controls) them all. He calls out kings and priests, scholars and paupers, foreigners and Spaniards, Indians and Geneveses, investors from the Orient, and armed forces, dukes, and country herds, Blacks and whites, Moors and Christians...on and on goes Quevedo’s top to bottom naming of those gamed and tamed by Don Dinero. The original excerpts:

Son sus padres principales,  
y es de nobles descendiente,  
porque en las venas de Oriente  
todas las sangres son reales;  
y pues es quien hace iguales  
al duque y al ganadero . . .  
y al cobarde hace guerrero . . .  
al noble y al pordiosero,  
poderoso caballero  
es don Dinero. (Lines 25-64)

In the Old Testament writings, a nearly identical device is used by Isaiah the prophet. Even more notably, Isaiah also writes regarding money, materials, and supplies. While Quevedo satirizes money’s omnipresent, equalizing ability to game and tame, Isaiah advances the storyline into the consequences of being Sir Money’s lover: unexpected impoverishment and pervasive conflict. Isaiah writes, claiming to speak for Yahweh, the God of Israel:

For behold, the Lord God of hosts is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and supply, all support of bread, and all support of water; the mighty man and the soldier, the judge and the prophet, the diviner and the

elder, the captain of fifty and the man of rank, the counselor and the skillful magician and the expert in charms. And I will make boys their princes, and infants shall rule over them. And the people will oppress one another, everyone his fellow and everyone his neighbor; the youth will be insolent to the elder, and the despised to the honorable. For a man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father, saying: “You have a cloak; you shall be our leader, and this heap of ruins shall be under your rule”; in that day he will speak out, saying: “I will not be a healer; in my house there is neither bread nor cloak; you shall not make me leader of the people. (Isaiah 3.1-7)

In verses one through three, Isaiah touches on the sudden destitution that will come upon Jerusalem and Judah’s money-lovers, which, according to his comprehensive naming, is just about everyone. In verses four through seven, Isaiah touches on the pervasive conflicts that are both immanent and imminent with materialism, especially when there is a dearth of supply or felt economic crisis. One can only speculate if “Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero” is Quevedo’s warning, or prequel of sorts, to the outcomes indicated in Isaiah 3.1-7. However, considering Spain’s top to bottom submersion in Catholicism, the Bible, Counter-Reformation efforts, and the transformation of Spanish society from traditionalist to mercantilist, it is not improbable. Quevedo’s *letrilla* could very well be an intended companion to Isaiah 3.1-7.

### Don Dinero’s Lover: The Woman Folly

A second parallel that seems to emerge between the poem and the Bible is the female “person” (personification) Quevedo employs as the speaker:



Madre, yo al oro me humillo;  
él es mi amante y mi amado,  
pues, de puro enamorado,  
de contino anda amarillo;  
que pues, doblón o sencillo,  
hace todo cuanto quiero,  
poderoso caballero  
es don Dinero. (Lines 1-8)

Is Sir Money’s metaphoric lover mercantilist Spain? Imperial Spain? Any money-loving individuals? While these are all plausible each in their own way, we propose the writer has a specific metaphor in mind: the metaphoric woman “Folly” of Proverbs 9.13-18. If true, Quevedo could be making a ubiquitous statement not only about the love of money, but also that such love is the very incarnation of foolishness, or Folly incarnate. Notice the parallels between the poem and Proverbs 9, where King Solomon writes:

The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way, “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” And to him who lacks sense she says, “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. (Proverbs 9.13-18)

Two correlations illumine as we ponder this passage. One, the metaphoric woman Folly “is seductive.” The context does not indicate eroticism but rather behavior in general, as Solomon has just finished personifying the woman Wisdom at multiple points in the previous chapters. He is poeticizing the seductive power of foolish behavior. There is a certain sugarcoated ignorance and blindness in a person incarnating Folly, which is why Solomon immediately follows with, “. . . and knows

nothing.” The speaker in Quevedo’s poem, too, is a metaphoric woman manifesting seduction and ignorance. She is in a passionate romance with Sir Money to begin the poem, but as the poem unfolds, she is blindsided by the utter enormity, mystique, and uncontrollability of her lover. According to the scholar Patricia Marshall, Quevedo’s *letrilla* suggests that “the subordination of spiritual impulses and traditional values of those with strong connection with feminine (desire, materialism, irrationality, hedonism, and sensuality) reproduce the very symbolic mechanisms that allow Don Dinero to assume multiple identities” (188).

Second, the woman Folly presents herself in two places, “at the door of her house . . . a seat on the highest places of the town.” This is a Hebrew colloquialism for ubiquity: the humblest, most individual of places (“the door of her house”) to the most powerful, collective of places (“the highest places of the town”) and everything in-between. This vibrating language indicates totality that can be seen in the Hebrew colloquialism “from Dan to Beersheba,” meaning all of Israel “from Dan in the far north to Beersheba,” in the far south (see Judges 20.1, 1 Samuel 3.20, 2 Samuel 17.11, etc.).

In the poem, Don Dinero is presented overtly as ubiquity. However, what is presented covertly is the ubiquity of human foolishness, or incarnating Folly, by loving Sir Money. After all, it was not the Spanish doubloon or any other commodity that was intrinsically omnipresent and omnipotent, but rather humanity’s materialistic psychology and idolatry that conferred these mystical qualities on things visible and tangible. Thus, we might ask along with Quevedo, “Which came first, the woman Folly or Sir Money?”

### Don Dinero’s Lover: The Adulterous Wife

A third parallel that seems to emerge between the *letrilla* and the Bible is, once

again, the female personification of Quevedo's speaker. In addition to invoking the metaphoric woman Folly, we propose that Quevedo is also channeling the adulterous wife personified in the Old Testament book of Hosea. Hosea's prophetic message and ministry were to the northern kingdom of Israel, whom God charged with "adultery" against Him by their materialistic idolatry, among other evils. Hosea chapter 2 specifies this in the following verses:

For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink' . . . And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal. Therefore, I will take back my grain in its time, and my wine in its season, and I will take away my wool and my flax, which were to cover her nakedness. And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees of which she said, 'These are my wages, which my lovers have given me.' I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them. And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baal when she burned offerings to them and adorned herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the LORD. (Hosea 2. 5-13)

Keeping in mind verses one through eight of the *letrilla*, quoted above, it is fascinating to notice Quevedo's opening lines are nearly identical to the above lines in Hosea. Hosea's Israel exclaims, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink . . . These are my wages, which my lovers have given me" (Hosea 2.5).

### **An Unholy Trinity: Ubiquity, Folly and Adultery**

We see, therefore, the unholy trinity of Ubiquity, Folly and Adultery with respect to loving money emanating from "Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero" – when read in light of Old Testament passages Quevedo most certainly would have known with familiarity. Was he trying to preach without preaching? Was he trying to stay true to poetry and the poetic spirit, and avoid a polemic that was too directly biblical? Did he think his message could reach a wider audience through poetry and common terms, as opposed to heavy theological language? We propose the strong possibility that this was in fact Quevedo's intent and strategy. The writer Patricia Marshall seems to agree when she states:

In short, by framing his criticism of Spain's new mercantile system in terms of a romantic relationship and by invoking the speaker's mother (*mater*) in the first line of the poem, Quevedo explores the hedonistic and sensual nature of a new economic system that was controlled by the irrational forces of unbridled passion typically connect with female sexuality and materialism in Western cultures. (189)

In conclusion, Francisco de Quevedo was a prolific thinker, rhetorician, and writer, and according to many, a theologian with rich understanding of Judeo-Christian texts. In his writings, he graces us with insightful recombination of multiple realms of study, contemplation, and commentary, recombination that consistently channel the Bible directly and indirectly. As shown in these analyses, he does exactly this in the *letrilla* "Poderoso Caballero es Don Dinero." In the poem he challenges us with his subtle ideals of God, love, justice, and integrity, and not-so-subtle linguistic menacing of money-loving and money-lovers. He delights and

provokes us with his frustrations concerning Spain's moral decomposition, seemingly driven by a surging romance with material things. He challenges us with his wish that Don Dinero be used as an equalizing force for good, not a disabling or unilateral force to create ludicrously disparate chasms of socioeconomic experience. Finally, he charms us and provokes us with the question that seems to be the underground river flowing through the poem: “Are we the metaphoric woman Folly in a blinding romance with Don Dinero, or are we the metaphoric woman Wisdom joining Quevedo in his grief and highest ideals?”



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