

The Power of Money: From Horace to Jonson and Quevedo

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The Classical motif of the power of money, exemplified by Horace's portrait of the early Roman Principate, in which he satirized the absurdities of inordinate greed and the idealization of wealth, was appropriated by the writers of early modern England and Spain, among them Ben Jonson (1572-1637) and Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645). Examining some of the work of Jonson and Quevedo, along with some other representative poetry of their time, will both confirm their shared classical heritage and highlight revealing points of divergence between the poetry of the two countries.

To begin with the theme of the power of money in classical poetry, Horace is known as a poet whose carefully crafted public persona emphasized his identity as the son of a freedman—and a defeated soldier in the Roman civil wars—who eventually “struggled free of ambition and was able to sketch out an early version of moral happiness in the process of rejecting political and economic preoccupations” (Anderson 154). Indeed, Horace's satires and epistles embody and champion the Epicurean ideal of

personal happiness through the avoidance of excess. In these terms, the first satire of Book I advises moderation in one's worldly ambition, stressing the foolishness of pursuing wealth beyond one's needs:

Suppose your threshing-floor has threshed out a hundred thousand bushels of grain; your stomach will not on that account hold more than mine: 'tis as if in the slave-gang you by chance should carry the heavy bread-bag on your shoulder, yet you would receive no more than the slave who carries nothing. (I: 1. 45-48; trans. Rudd)

By likening the pursuit of wealth to the efforts of the overburdened slave (47-48), Horace implies—with a classic example of Epicurean values—the metaphoric slavery of worldly ambition and devotion to material excess. As this satire shows, inordinate desire or greed are ultimately destined to end in frustration, as those who “are enticed by a desire which continually cheats them” can never be satisfied, feeling that “Nothing is enough ... for you're only worth what you have” (*Sat.* I.1. 61-62). Evidently, excessive materialist desire is exposed as ultimately most problematic because it turns the—would-be—possessor himself into a possession, whose worth is measured by what he owns—or does not own.

Such critique of ambition and praise of moderation—figured in the same poem through reference to “the man who lives within Nature's bounds” (49-50)—frequently idealized the traditional austerity of self-sufficient rural life. Similarly, in his epistle to Lollius Maximus (*Ep.*, I.2), Horace adopts the voice of an old-fashioned Roman, as he addresses his friend from the simplicity of his Sabine farm, telling him that “when one's blest with enough, one shouldn't long for more” (44-46).

Although England and Spain had their own historical particularities, like other European nations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both experienced a phenomenal increase in the sale of titles of nobility, a

side-effect of increased monetarism, alongside the evidently continued desirability of such traditional titles (Maravall 92). In Spain, the nobility, comprising both the typically wealthy *caballeros* (knights) and the larger, less prosperous, gentry of the countryside—the *hidalgos*—made up approximately “a tenth” of the families in Castile—more than twice the English rate—and, in some of the northern provinces of Cantabria, the entire population claimed nobility and were granted such privileges as tax exemption (Dominguez Ortiz 113-14).

In the context of early modern London and Madrid, two rapidly-growing national capitals which witnessed the ferment of often conflicting civic-commercial, aristocratic and royal interests, Jonson and Quevedo occupied analogous social positions. Though Quevedo—who eventually joined the lower nobility as a landed knight—occupied a higher social position than Ben Jonson, the latter also straddled the margin between those of common rank, such as his bricklaying stepfather—whose trade Jonson resentfully followed in his youth—and the status of a gentleman with which the poet identified, a status which he violently maintained, even—as others have argued—through the violent self-assertion of the duel (Riggs 79-80; Yachnin 54-55). In these terms, both writers functioned somewhat as social gatekeepers. Their writing indicates their opposition to a perceived breakdown of traditional social values and boundaries; moreover, they blamed that perceived decline upon the increasing dominance of materialism by which I mean an elevation of monetary wealth as a social value competing with the pre-modern—but, of course, still persistent—social ideal of gentle or noble birth (rank).

Admittedly, the emergence of a middle class in early modern London—or, rather, of a *middling sort* of people—who would within a few decades overthrow their monarch, had no comparable analogue in early modern Spain. It is, arguably, for this reason that the motif of the power of money took on a distinct tone in the poetry of Golden Age Spain—where it was

less concerned with social relations and more so with matters of sexual morality, for example.

However, of particular interest for the present discussion are those satirical pieces in which early modern poets questioned—even attacked—the ethos of materialism through ironic praise of the power of money. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the use of this motif in early modern satire engages vigorously with the social and cultural paradigms of the time.

Spanish poetry of the sixteenth century was characterized by humanist values. One example is its use of the Epicurean themes and mode we have seen above—rather than by virulent, Juvenalian attacks associated with much seventeenth-century satire. For instance, Andrés Fernández de Andrada’s “*Epístola moral a Fabio*” (“Moral Epistle to Fabio”), espouses Epicurean values and even uses Horace’s *beatus ille* motif of the *blessed* life of rural simplicity, presenting them in much the same style. The epistle’s speaker refers sadly to the spread of corruption due to ambition and greed, and voices contempt for worldly ambition and the blind pursuit of wealth, the “tyranny” of material ambition—of “Gold” and its “wiles”, which “often prevail over the good” (28-29).

Moreover, though the critique of greed and materialist corruption of order is of classical origin, Fernández de Andrada’s imagery is also indebted to the Spanish discourse of the Columbian discovery of America, through moralistic reversal of its triumphal mode:

Woe to anyone who runs and traverses
As many climes and oceans as may be crossed,
In covetous pursuit of gold and silver! (124-26)

The poem’s emphasis, however, remains on the healthy, viable alternative—the speaker’s ideal of a life of simple dignity:

A corner is enough among my *Lares*,
 A good book and an old friend, a brief slumber,
 Undisrupted by any debts or worries. (127-29)

Such moderation—not indulgent excess—was the mark of Epicurean happiness, which defined pleasure as the absence of discomfort or pain; not luxurious space but a “corner”; not an adoring or servile multitude but “an old friend”; not slothful idleness but “a brief slumber”; not wealth but freedom from “debts or worries” (127-29).

To turn to the classic model, of course, Horace sometimes did present a more lively—even aggressive—critique of materialism, especially in his satires, in which he stressed the absurdly misplaced importance given to wealth. It is in this particular themes and mode that the poets and dramatists and Jacobean London and Spanish poets of approximately the same time, such as Quevedo, closely resemble the Roman originals.

In Jonson’s satirical urban comedy, *Volpone*, or *The Fox* (1607), the eponymous hero’s opening speech is a passionate, fervid ode to his gold, which he addresses with the adoration due to a god:

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
 Open the shrine that I may see my saint.
 Hail the world’s soul, and mine! (*Volpone* 1.1. 1-3).

Volpone’s materialism not only replaces filial and social bonds, but also constitutes a travesty of the ascetic opposition of spiritual and worldly concerns. Enthralled by greed, *Volpone* unwittingly exposes the absurd, morally opprobrious status of wealth as an overvalued commodity, and specifically its role as the ultimate moral corrupter. As the theatrical sharper states: “The price of souls; even hell, with [riches] to boot, / Is made worth heaven” (*Volpone* 1.1. 23-24). Indeed, the whole speech harks back to the opening lines of the play, in which gold is called “the world’s

soul" (1.1. 4). Briefly put, then, gold stands in this scene for the spirit or ethos of materialism, exposed satirically as a value which has been elevated beyond any pragmatic sense to become what David Hawkes has aptly described as "the money fetishism" of the period (Hawkes 24).

Along with Virgil and Ovid, Horace was one of the most important poets of the time of Caesar Augustus. In Horace's *Satires*, II. 3, the poet's friend, Damasippus, lectures him about the vanity of worldly ambition, the speech's central lines being an ironic enumeration of the virtues of money. This ironic ploy—a satirical critique of materialism—would become Jonson's model for the end of Volpone's speech in praise of gold. First, in Horace's poem, Damasippus tells the poet of the madness of one "Staberius", a man who had his heirs "carve on stone the full amount of his state" because "if he'd died a penny poorer" he would have considered himself correspondingly less worthy of respect (90-94). In these terms, as Damasippus expands on the corrupted morality of Staberius, as supposedly manifested in social life:

The man who has made his pile - he
is famous, brave and upright ... and a king
and whatever he likes (*Sat.* ii.3. 96-98).

In an echo of these verses, when Jonson's Volpone says that he who gets gold "shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise", his minion, Mosca, pipes in: "and what he will" (*Volpone* I.1. 26-28).

In another Horatian example, the Epistle to Numicius (*Ep.* I.6), which has for its theme the vanity of worldly ambition, Horace similarly comments archly on the appealing power of money, since "a wife and dowry, credit and friends, / birth and looks are conferred by her royal highness Money" (*Ep.* i.6. 36-37).

Jonson deals with this very theme in a poem appropriately called "The

Power of Gold”, in which the speaker describes the precious metal as the very source of “Respect and observation” (3), ironically crediting it with blinding judgement (12), and, specifically, with corrupting women when the speaker exclaims with mock-enthusiasm: “Then why should we despair? Despair away: / When gold’s the motive, women have no nay” (13-14).

Elsewhere, Jonson focuses explicitly, not so much on *what money can do for people*, as on *what people will do for money*. For example, consider these lines from *The Forest*:

Whil’st that, for which, all vertue now is sold,
 And almost every vice, almightie gold,
 That which, to boote with hell, is thought worth heaven,
 And, for it, life, conscience, yea, soules are given (*Forest* 12. 1-4)

As Donaldson explains with reference to Jonson’s *Discoveries*, the poet decided early that “the excellent man above the rest” whom “he would aim to follow ... was the Roman poet Horace, ‘an author of much civility’” (*Discoveries* 1839-42, qtd Donaldson 16).

Indeed, Jonson’s evident sense of the need not merely to produce good writing, but to be an “excellent *man*” (my emphasis), has also been stressed by one of the foremost Jonson scholars, Richard Helgerson, who observed that Jonson, in *binding* himself to the principle that “to be a good poet he must first be a good man”, could not readily “escape from his literary persona” (Helgerson 136). Similarly, Riggs explained in his biography of Jonson that the poet idealized and strove to emulate Horace, whom he saw as a champion of “urbanity and simplicity” (Riggs 73), so that Horace’s triumph over his rivals in *Poetaster*, as he comes to enjoy Caesar’s favour and “the post of moralist to the Imperial Court” revealed Jonson’s own “fantasy of self-vindication” against his Elizabethan rivals (Riggs 76-77).

As is well-known, Jonson's career as a self-appointed moralist poet required him to steer a course which would allow him—mindful of “the dignity of the poet's profession” (Riggs 80)—to maintain his integrity and freedom from compromise while, at the same time, he conscious of the danger of corruption and of mindful of the stigma that mercenary compromise would bring cautiously courted the favor of his aristocratic patrons (Donaldson 17; Moul 23; Wayne 124).

Perceiving the materialist ethos as a threat to the traditional social hierarchy, Jonson balanced his praise in the “Epistle to Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland” with ironic praise of “almighty gold” (2), which in Jonson's words, “give(s) pride fame and peasants birth” (24-26). Dating from the end of Elizabeth's reign, this poem predates the wholesale creation of knighthoods in the early years of James I's reign, which resulted in the threefold expansion of the knightly order to over three thousand men (Stone 41). The time of the poem's composition, therefore, emphasizes Jonson's ideological position, given that he was disturbed by social mobility and the disruption of hierarchy even before it had become a matter of public notoriety; when the latter occurred, it was addressed most notably in the Jacobean city comedies, whose dramatists, of course, would include Jonson.

The Spanish satirist Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645) also employed the motif of the power of gold in several moral and satirical poems which speak from a position similar to Jonson's. His tone is generally harsher than that of Fernández de Andrada above—Stoic values and the harsher mode of Juvenalian satire somewhat jostling with his predecessor's gentler Epicurean and Horatian approach. But, as the leading satirist of Spain's *Siglo de Oro* (“Golden Age”), Quevedo responded to Spain's imperial decline, in a prolific, fifty-year writing career, which included occasional prose and a picaresque novel, as well as poetry, much of it scathing in tone but always masterful in technique.

Besides general diatribes against social corruption and vice, Quevedo indulged in vehement attacks against the king's chief advisors, which occasionally saw him confined to his estate. Despite this, he rose to the ranks of the lower nobility in 1621 (Cabo Aseguinolaza). Of course, by then, as he may have wryly observed, such noble rank had lost much of its traditional prestige. Indeed, titles of nobility were laid open to literally thousands of people—9,000 new members in the seventeenth century (Thompson I: 184).

A fierce moralist and conservative on matters of social mobility, Quevedo saw only base greed and adventurism in his country's imperial enterprise in America. Indeed, a major historian has described Quevedo's conscious rejection of the ethos of materialism, which was already an irreversible reality of the age, as evidence of the poet's *evangelical* character (Maravall 275).

Criticism of the American colonial enterprise, such as we saw in Fernández de Andrada's "Moral Epistle to Fabio", features largely in Spanish writing of the period wherever writers address contemporary corruption, social or spiritual. For an example of Quevedo's attitudes and style, I will discuss a moral and distinctly metaphysical sonnet, "*Advierte de la temeridad de los que navegan*" ("Warns of the Temerity of those who Sail"), which castigates the hemp plant for its use in the rigging and sails of America-bound ships. Hemp, thus, is no mere "humble grass", but "a machine to be feared, / Whose mighty vigour, deviously concealed, / Has the whole wide world's waters under threat" (2-4). To conclude, Quevedo asserts:

Fewer lives will this fibre stifle dead,
In nooses knotted than in woven sails:
As if shrouds had into flight been guided. (12-14)

Used in sail-making, hemp fibre becomes the means for condemning the venal pursuit of transatlantic colonial expansion—physical and spiritual dangers conflated, as ship’s sails become nets which catch misguided souls. Quevedo estimates that fewer lives would be lost to hemp braided into nooses than when it is woven into cloth—sails being, “*mortajas introducidas a volar*” (“shrouds put into flight”, 14). Quite evident here is Quevedo’s moral, religious tone, as the poet plays with the ideas of earthly life, literally lost in shipwrecks, and of spiritual life, lost in a greedy enterprise.

By contrast, “*Poderoso caballero es don Dinero*” (“A Mighty Lord is Master Gold”)—arguably Quevedo’s most famous poem—deals to a greater degree with social relations. On the subject of greed, “the seam of gold / makes even the oaks greedy” (47-48)—an allusion to the oaken ships sent to America. Quevedo, thus, questioned the benefits for Spanish society of the incoming American bullion. The poem personifies such wealth as a gallant gentleman called “Don Dinero” (Sir Money; or, as I prefer to call him “Master Gold”), whose praises are sung by a girl to her mother. He is, first of all, an *indiano*, a colonial-born man often caricatured in the literature of Golden Age Spain for the disruptive social power of his new-made wealth:

From the Indies he comes, of noble birth,
Where rich and poor bless his mother’s womb;
He travels to Spain, where he meets cold Death,
But only Genoa shall have his tomb (9-12).

Through Genoa, a leading banking capital in the period, Quevedo attacks the financial world, which hangs over the rest of the poem as he catalogues the effects of materialism on the traditional social hierarchy and on the corresponding, aristocratic ethos. But, it is Don Dinero’s subversion of social distinctions—including those of racial and religious identity—that make the ethos of materialism which he embodies so threatening: for he is

"The worthiest chap in any nation, / As much a Christian as a Moor"
(19-20).

Neither birth nor merit, in fact, are seen to stand in the way of the power of money, which also "helps the fool to win the election" (36) and corrupts the judiciary (51-52).

Of particular importance is Quevedo's satirical catalogue of the ways in which money allows for transgression of the social order. Wealth "makes equals of the duke and the herdsman" ("*hace iguales / al duque y al ganadero*"; 31-32). Quevedo's complaint is clearly against a *money economy* which functions outside the economy of birth and title of the traditional feudal order. On the topic of rank and title, Quevedo plays on words—since the Spanish "*escudo*", literally a shield, is both a coat-of-arms and the name of a gold coin current at the time. Thus, he also criticizes the sale of titles (45-46).

At the heart of the poem, the main issue is not merely that money can "soften the harshest judge" (56), or cause ladies to "cheapen what they hold dear" (70), but that materialism has grown into the dominant ethos; wealth does not simply separate rich and poor, but, indeed, "*da calidad / al noble y al pordiosero*" (gives both the nobleman and the beggar their quality) (63-64).

However, perhaps the most significant difference between English and Spanish treatments of money or wealth and of their power to transform and corrupt is the greater emphasis Spanish poets placed upon the violation of sexual honor.

This sexual moralism, expressed in terms which highlight the classical grounding of the poetry, is also illustrated in the work of Quevedo's contemporary, Francisco de Rioja (1583-1659). In Rioja's poem "*A la riqueza*" ("To Wealth"), the speaker stresses that covetousness leads not only to violence but also to sexual shame and dishonor, tempting maidens and married women alike:

*Pierde su flor la virginal pureza
por ti, i vesse manchado
con adulterio el lecho, no esperado.*

[For you, virgin purity loses its flower, / And, unexpectedly, the marriage bed / Sees itself most shamefully stained.] (39-41; trans. mine)

When looking at Spanish poetry of the early modern period, it is clear, therefore, that purely social concerns never displaced moral values and moralistic observations—in contrast to the work of English poets of the same time, such as Jonson. Yet, the two countries produced Horatian poetry which critiqued the increasing idealization of materialism and the attendant decline in social hierarchy in their countries. This point of convergence illustrates the ultimately conservative social positions expressed by Jonson, Quevedo and their contemporaries.

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ABSTRACT**The Power of Money: From Horace to Jonson and Quevedo****Ivan Cañadas**

This paper examines the Classical motif of the power of money as found in Horace's satire of materialism (Sat. I.1, II.3, Ep. I.2, I.6) and the use of this motif in the satires of Ben Jonson (Volp. I.1, The Forest: 'Robert Wroth', 'Countess of Rutland', Misc. 'The Power of Gold') and some Spanish poets of the same period: Rioja ("To Wealth"), Fernández de Andrada ("Moral Epistle to Fabio") and, especially, the satirist Francisco de Quevedo (Son, Let. Sat., vi,vii,viii,xviii, and "Poderoso caballero es don Dinero").

These poets wrote from similar positions in the conservative opposition to the loosening of the traditional social hierarchy—something that is borne out by an examination of their use of the Classical motif of the power of money. Their work exhibits a dual concern to satirise both specific transgressions of the traditional social order and the cultural changes—i.e.: the rise of a materialist ethos—associated with such transgression.

Key Words | Jonson, Quevedo, Horace, social satire, power of money/power of gold, materialism, social order/hierarchy