
Swallowing Mosquitoes, Wine, and Supplement with Quevedo

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The breadth of thematic scope in Quevedo's poetry is evident to even the most casual reader. Browsing José Manuel Blecua's four-volume edition of Quevedo's collected poems, one finds, for example, sonnets concerning the virtues of finely ground tobacco, verses attributing the fall of Rome to corruption amongst provincial governors, and three separate poems concerning the hourglass, the sundial, and the belltower clock.¹ Even if we restrict ourselves to the topic of eating and drinking, no fewer than twenty-five poems addressing this theme have been noted by Arnold Rothe (114-116). Nevertheless, it may still be somewhat surprising to find numerous poems amidst his corpus that concern wine and mosquitoes. The most extensive of these is a sonnet, numbered 531 in Blecua's edition, which bears the title "Bebe vino precioso con mosquitos dentro" ["Drinking precious wine containing mosquitoes"] (II: 15). First printed in the *Parnaso Español* [*Spanish Parnassus*] of 1648, this work has been reproduced in several anthologies and studies, although it is far from the best known of Quevedo's satiric works.² It deals, as the title suggests, with the unwelcome intrusion of airborne interlopers into the sensual world of the oenophile. What is perhaps most striking about the work is the attitude of acceptance on behalf of the speaker, who, despite unleashing an increasingly grotesque series of metaphors in describing the mosquitoes, seems in the end resigned to the inevitability of their unwelcome presence, and confronts it in a very practical fashion, swallowing mosquitoes and wine in one precious gulp. Exploring the sonnet in terms of the supplement shows how this concept can be seen to inform both the structure and the meaning of the text and to help explain the speaker's reaction.

The sonnet reads as follows:

Tudescos moscos de los sorbos finos,
caspa de las azumbres más sabrosas,
que porque el fuego tiene mariposas,
queréis que el mosto tenga marivinos;

aves luquetes, átomos mezquinos,
motas borrachas, pájaras vinosas,

pelusas de los vinos invidiosas,
abejas de la miel de los tocinos;

liendres de la vendimia, yo os admito
en mi gazzate, pues tenéis por sogá
al nieto de la vid, licor bendito.

Tomá en el trago hacia mi nuez la boga;
que, bebiéndoos a todos, me desquito
del vino que bebiste y os ahoga.

[Saxon mosquitoes of refined sips,
dandruff of the tastiest two-liter jugs,
since the flame has its butterflies,
you wish the must to have winoflies;

flying garnishes, wretched atoms,
drunken motes, vinaceous birds,
wine-envying fluff,
bees of the honey of bacon;

nits of the vintage, I'll allow you
into my gullet, since your rope is
the grandson of the vine, blessèd liquor.

Set to rowing toward my Adam's apple;
and, drinking you all down, I'll take back
the wine you drank and that drowns you.]

With the exception of four words, the sonnet may be divided thematically into two parts: the quatrains, which describe the situation or problem with a series of metaphors, and the tercets, which present the resolution to the problem. The quatrains show great unity and formal coherence; the verses may be paired according to their similar syntactic structures, and of course there is great thematic unity since they all describe the mosquitoes in the wine. These descriptions take various forms; some use birds or other flying insects as metaphors—“aves” [“birds”] and “abejas” [“bees”], for example—while others use metaphors based on size, such as “átomos” [“atoms”] or “motas” [“motes”].

Lía Schwartz Lerner has remarked that the metaphor is “el recurso más complejo y atractivo del lenguaje poético de Quevedo” [“the most complex and attractive device in Quevedo’s poetic language”], going on to note that “Una metáfora feliz era aquella que eludía la imagen mimética de una realidad exterior segura y la sustituía por la visión indirecta y tortuosa de extrañas correspondencias” [“The felicitous metaphor was that which evaded the mimetic image of a secure exterior reality, replacing it with

an indirect, torturous vision of strange connections”] (18-22). This is certainly the case in sonnet 531, as the metaphors used are a worthy showcase for the grotesque, playing strange correspondences for their maximum effect. In the first verse the mosquitoes become “Tudescos moscos de los sorbos finos” [“Saxon mosquitoes of refined sips”]. José Manuel Blecua explains that the reference to the Germans is due to the fact that “los alemanes dejaron fama de buenos bebedores desde el reinado de Carlos V” [“the Germans were renowned as hearty drinkers since the reign of Carlos V”], while Ignacio Arellano Ayuso is somewhat less diplomatic, stating that “los alemanes tenían fama de borrachos en la época” [“the Germans have a reputation as drunkards in the period “].³ The use of the term “mosco” [“mosquito”] instead of the more common form “mosquito” may be due to its close correspondence to the word “moscón” which, besides referring to a large fly, can be used figuratively to describe a bothersome person, a meaning very appropriate given the speaker’s reaction to the mosquitoes in the wine. It also reinforces the personification of the mosquitoes initiated by the first word of the poem. This personification is simply the first and most conventional step in the steadily increasing process of defamiliarization that the mosquitoes undergo.

The personification implied in this first verse is also interesting for another reason. Among other observations, Covarrubias notes the following in his definition of the word “mosquito”: “para dar a entender que una persona es amiga [del vino], suelen llamarle mosquito, por el amor que unos y otros le tienen” [“to say that someone is a friend of wine, we call the person mosquito, out of the love each has for it”] (815). Therefore the mosquitoes are not only in the wine, but he or she who is thirsty enough to drink wine with mosquitoes in it is himself or herself a mosquito. The ambiguity of this term “mosquito” gives rise to play with the notions of primacy, center, and periphery. These notions are closely related to Derrida’s concept of the supplement, which Jonathan Culler explains as follows:

The supplement is an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself, but the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself. These two different meanings of *supplement* are linked in a powerful logic, and in both meanings the supplement is presented as exterior, foreign to the “essential” nature of that to which it is added or in which it is substituted. (103)

The drinker feels the insect to be an unwanted addition, a superfluous and bothersome supplement to the precious glass of wine. The insect’s point of view, however, may well be the opposite, seeing the human as the unwanted, additional presence to be avoided. Consequently, it is ambiguous which element is supplementing which, and the labeling of center and periphery is not a straightforward affair. Both our

mosquitoes, insect and human alike, drink from the same glass, and each wishes to avoid the presence of the other: they are opposite and yet synonymous, and the semantic ambiguity inherent in the term “mosquito” facilitates this double meaning. This ambiguity will undergo a further transformation in the tercets, where by an act of gastronomic union, center, periphery, and the liquid frontier separating and limiting the two worlds will become redefined.

The second verse introduces the metaphor of dandruff, upping the grotesqueness level one notch and also demonstrating the disorder that can result when a supplement is added. Both wine and the mosquito are elements of complex systems: the mosquito lives in constant interaction with the natural world in an effort to survive and procreate, while wine is the end product of a complex system of cultivation. Yet neither system functions as perfectly as one might wish: if either the vintner or the drinker has dandruff, it is almost inevitable that some of it will mix at some point with the pressed grapes, supplementing the wine in an unwelcome fashion. Indeed, it appears unavoidable that the perfection of the “vino precioso” [“precious wine”] will be ruined, or at least lessened, in some way. Here the systems of wine production and the mosquito’s life-cycle have intersected, much to human displeasure, and increasing the disorder of both.

The inevitability of a foreign presence in the wine is explored even further in the third and fourth verses, where a parallel is established between the attraction of moths to the flame and mosquitoes to wine. (It should be noted that the mosquito of our sonnet will meet just as fatal an end as the candle-drawn moth.) Quevedo’s neologism “marivinos” (a term based on “mariposa,” which can be used to refer to a butterfly or a moth and is used by Quevedo in describing the mosquitoes) is something that, according to lexical norms, ought not to be, just as the mosquitoes, by culinary standards, are not to be allowed in fine wine. The word is a union of “mariposa” [“butterfly”] and “vino” [“wine”] and thus “marivinos” represents at the linguistic level the situation within the glass as described in the sonnet. Yet this union is not a perfect one; it is an unexpected, quasi-compound of sorts in which “vinos” simultaneously supplements and supplants the original term “mariposa.” The speaker’s tone of disapproval at this point may be viewed as an attempt to establish centrality and control of the situation, marginalizing the supplemental mosquito.

The fifth and sixth verses establish a great structural and rhythmic regularity. Each verse consists of two noun-adjective combinations, the first of five syllables and the second of six, separated by a caesura. In each verse the number of syllables and the syllabic stressing of the noun-adjective combinations are identical. This regularity will later be employed as the basis for a strongly contrasting irregularity in the tercets. In these verses the mosquitoes are metaphorically associated with

the flying, the tiny and minute, and the world of wine and its consumption. The “luquete” [“garnish”] mentioned in the fifth verse is a bit of orange peel frequently put into wine. Both orange peel and mosquito are supplements to the wine, but of course the distinction between the two is crucial to the drinker, who naturally wishes to control this process of supplementation, yet finds it beyond his or her complete dominion.

The word “invidiosas” [“envious”] in the seventh verse is not uncommon in the period; in fact, Covarrubias affords “invidia” [“envy”] an entry, yet does not mention “envidia” [“envy”] at all. The word is used in the poetry of Quevedo in at least one other instance of which I am aware.⁴ Dámaso Alonso, speaking of the same word in Góngora, notes that it is a “cultismo,” used in place of “envidia.” Its use here is especially apt since it may be read as a bilingual pun mixing the Latin preposition “in” [“in”] with the Spanish “vid” [“wine”]. Thus two linguistic worlds, different yet strikingly similar, are bound tightly together: the “pelusas” [“fluff,” “fuzz,” or “down”] are literally in the wine, just as much as they are envious or desirous of it. This can be seen as once again employing the technique of linguistic mixing and hybridization that was employed in the preceding stanza. This envy may be extended even further, as it is no great stretch to imagine the mosquitoes envying the relatively enormous quantities the human is able to consume, while the human mosquito may well envy the insects, who are swimming in a vast pool of fine vintage. Accordingly, the notion of ambiguity between center and margin is again brought into play, foreshadowing the physical mixing of these planes, which will occur at the end of the poem.

The eighth verse—“abejas de la miel de los tocinos” [“bees of the honey of bacon”]—is one of the clearest expressions of the concept of supplement to be found in the sonnet. Here a chain of subordination is presented at the linguistic level, beginning with the bees, defined in relation to the honey, which is in turn defined in relation to the bacon. (Several authorities have noted the custom of serving bacon with honey in Quevedo’s day, thus “de los tocinos” refers to wine and “abejas de la miel” to the mosquitoes.⁵) Since previous verses have had at most two terms subordinated in this fashion, the addition of another brings to mind Derrida’s concept of the chain of supplementation, to which another term may always be added. The supplementation of the speaker’s wine is therefore seen as never-ending since first the vintner’s dandruff, then the speaker’s own, then one mosquito, and then yet another populate the wine.

Still, all the terms in this verse are metaphors: wine is displaced by honey, and mosquitoes by bees. We continually dance around the periphery but never hit the center, never fully naming what it is we are talking about. In fact, the word

“mosquito” does not appear anywhere in the poem itself. Paul Julian Smith has explained this phenomenon as exemplary of the difference between renaissance and baroque poetry, saying that “the Spanish difference [is] one of verbal and conceptual overloading” (7). The dialectic of presence and absence that is seen throughout the poem can be explained by Smith’s observation that “The figure stands in for the proper or native term, but also goes beyond it in verbal potency. It both substitutes for and adds to plain language. In Derrida’s words, the action of the figure is ‘supplementary’” (13).

Not only might we imagine another term being added to this eighth verse, but the quatrains themselves, through their exuberant and repeated metaphorical displacement, give the sensation that another metaphor describing mosquitoes in wine could easily be added, extending still further the chain of supplementation. In fact, this is what happens when we reach the tercets. Here we encounter a phrase that is out of place thematically. The description of the mosquitoes, which by earlier, renaissance notions of logic and order ought to have ended with the eighth verse, has passed its border and contaminated the tercets with yet another metaphor, surpassing those that had gone before in grossness if not also grotesqueness: “Lindres de la vendimia” [“nits of the vintage”]. These words have crossed not only a conceptual frontier but also the physical border of the verses as they appear on the printed page, just as the mosquitoes have entered the forbidden territory of the wine. Thus a strong correspondence between form and content in the sonnet is established.

This supplement—this excess term—has a somewhat chaotic effect; by being where it ought not to be it seems to cause the enjambment of ninth and tenth verses, the first use of this device in the poem. The new descriptor has seemingly pushed the orderly verses of the tercets into disarray, displacing words and creating enjambment not only from the ninth to tenth verses but also from the tenth to eleventh and thirteenth to fourteenth. The supplement, once again, enters into the picture, disrupting the orderly system that had been established in the first eight verses of the poem. Compared to the quatrains, the tercets seem quite deficient in formal unity and structural clarity. The ultimate reaction of the speaker to the supplementation of his wine is one of reluctant acceptance. Both wine and mosquitoes alike are admitted into the throat and consumed, just as the baroque poet admits the supplement into his or her verses. Supplementation is accepted as something inevitable, and is even celebrated, through the almost playful exuberance of the metaphors.

Throughout the poem we have seen metaphors that use a combination of grotesque and disparate elements, such as “caspa de las azumbres” [“dandruff of the two-liter jugs”]. In the tenth verse the word “gaznate,” which refers to the upper part of the trachea, demonstrates this same operation at the etymological level. It is formed,

according to Covarrubias, by a combination of the words “gañote” (meaning “garguero” or “gaznate,” all three of which are synonyms) and “gaznar” [“to caw”]. But, whereas the earlier use of “marivinos” was a neologism—something not accepted, or not yet accepted, into the lexicon—“gaznate” is an accepted item of vocabulary, and this lack of neologisms or strident metaphors can be seen as signaling an acceptance of the supplement, and of the mosquitoes in the wine.

The play between center and periphery comes into focus yet again with the word “soga” [“rope”] in the tenth verse. In addition to introducing a series of maritime images, it can also be seen as a reference to death. Not only is the wine a rope to climb down the drinker’s throat with, but it is one that will hang the mosquitoes until they are quite dead. However, implicit in the death of the mosquitoes within the glass is that of the mosquito outside the glass, who downs the glass of wine, mosquitoes and all. These insects, who literally drink themselves to death, consumed by their great attraction to wine, foreshadow an early death to the human mosquito who drinks too heavily.

The concepts of supplement and of ambiguity between center and periphery can be seen as related to the notion of *pharmakon*. This Greek term, meaning both medicine and poison, is used by Derrida, following on Plato, to refer to “the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other” (127). The idea of *pharmakon* is brought clearly to mind in the eleventh verse where the expression “licor bendito” [“blessed liquor”] is used as a metaphor for wine in a clear reference to the practice of communion. In the sacrament of communion, through the miraculous transubstantiation, wine becomes the blood of Christ. For the insect mosquitoes of the sonnet, the transformation has been in the opposite direction. Their usual diet of blood has been replaced by another liquid of similar appearance but different characteristics. And soon they themselves will experience a transformation in the stomach of the drinker where they will be converted into nutrients to be carried to the cells by his bloodstream. So, while the transformation of transubstantiation is one that holds the promise of life after death, the transformation the mosquitoes have embarked on will lead assuredly to death after their brief lives. And the drinker, the other mosquito, can perhaps see in the mortality of the insects a reflection and foreshadowing of his or her own. Thus wine is revealed as a sort of *pharmakon*, giving life and death at the same time.

The attitude of the speaker in sonnet 531 is not one of longing for a mythical golden age of perfection, but rather of acceptance of the inevitable supplementation of the wine. Not only are the mosquitoes admitted into his or her throat, but the supplement they represent and the disruption they have created are admitted

into his or her life, where they become part of the drinker. Despite the delightful repulsion of the initial metaphors, there is in the end an acceptance of a less than perfect and somewhat ambiguous situation.

The process of supplementation seen in the poem does not even stop with the sonnet itself. A very similar theme, indeed, what is really a reworking of the sonnet, is to be found in a *décima* bearing the title “Al mosquito del vino,” first published in 1654 in Alfay’s *Poesías varias de grandes ingenios* [*Various Poems of Great Geniuses*].⁶

Motaolosa,
de sorbos ave luquete:
mosco irlandés del sorbete,
y del vino mariposa.
De cuba rana vinoso,
liendre del tufo más fino,
y de la miel del tocino
abeja, zupia mosquito:
yo te bebo, y me desquito
lo que me bebes de vino.

[Drunken, gluttonous mote,
garnish-bird of sips:
Irish sherbet fly,
and butterfly of wine.
Vintage-soaked cask frog
nit of the finest nose,
and of the honey of bacon
bee, mosquito of the dregs:
I drink you, and avenge myself
of that wine of mine you drank.]

The *décima* bears great superficial similarity to the sonnet. Both begin with the description of the mosquito or mosquitoes, occupying the majority of the poem, followed by a recounting of the act of drinking the insect(s) away. Numerous phrases and metaphors are to be found in both poems with only the slightest of differences. The expressions “mota borracha” [“drunken mote”] and “ave luquete” [“garnish-bird”] are present in both works, as are comparisons with butterflies, the larva of lice, references to the consumption of bacon with wine and to the production of honey by bees. Indeed, so great is their similarity that perhaps the most striking differences initially are the number of the mosquitoes in the wine, singular or plural, and the fact that the Irish rather than the German people are impugned as heavy drinkers.

The longer sonnet form, however, allows for greater expression and the development of a stronger correspondence between form and content that is absent from the shorter, *décima* version. The clear structure and orderly progression of the quatrains are absent here, and no strong contrast is developed such as exists between the quatrains and the tercets in the sonnet. Although there is one instance of enjambment, it does not clearly seem to violate a physical or conceptual border. The *décima* reads almost as a gloss or summary of the sonnet, possessing all the most salient elements of the original yet lacking its delicious complexity.

The attraction of mosquitoes to wine, mentioned by Covarrubias in his entry for that insect, is also mentioned by Quevedo in other works, among them the sonnet “Leyes bacanales de un convite” [“Bacchanal Laws of a Banquet”] (II: 45 #581). The presence of mosquitoes is relatively incidental here and they are invoked as a plague upon the drinkers’ foreheads: “los mosquitos sean plaga a los tetuces” [“May the mosquitoes be a plague upon the foreheads”]. The *letrilla burlesca* “Dijo a la rana el mosquito” [“Said the Frog unto the Mosquito”] (II: 190 #666) contains a much lengthier exploration of the attraction of mosquitoes to wine and, as with the *décima*, shows Quevedo’s propensity for reworking his own figures and metaphors into a variety of metrical forms.⁷

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

Agua no me satisface,
sea clara, limpia y pura;
pues aun con cuanto mormura,
menos mal dice que hace.
Nadie quiero que me cace;
morir quiero en mi garlito.

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

En el agua hay solos peces;
y, para que más te corras,
en vino hay lobos y zorras
y aves, como yo, a las veces.
En cueros hay pez y peces;
todo cabe en mi distrito.

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

No te he de perdonar cosa,
pues que mi muerte disfamas;
y si borracho me llamas,
yo te llamaré aguanosa.
Tú en los charcos enfadosa;
yo en las bodegas habito.

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

¿Qué tienes tú que tratar,
grito de cienos y lodos,
pues tragándome a mí todos,
nadie te puede tragar?
Cantora de muladar,
yo soy luquete bendito.

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

Yo soy ángel de la uva,
y en los sótanos más frescos,
ruiseñor de los tudescos,
sin acicate ni tuba.
Yo estoy siempre en una cuba,
y tú estás siempre en un grito.

*Dijo a la rana el mosquito
desde una tinaja;
“Mejor es morir en el vino
que vivir en el agua”.*

*[Said the mosquito unto the frog
from inside a vat;
“’tis better to die in the wine
than to live in the water.”*

Water does not satisfy me,
be it clear, clean and pure;
since however much it murmurs,

it's always worse than it sounds.
 I want none to hunt me down;
 I want to die in my own trap.
*Said the mosquito unto the frog
 from inside a vat;
 "tis better to die in the wine
 than to live in the water."*

In the water there are only fish;
 while, to keep you on the run,
 in wine there are drunken skunks and vixens
 and birds, at times, such as I.
 In wineskins there is pitch and those pissed to the gills;
 anything goes in my part of town.
*Said the mosquito unto the frog
 from inside a vat;
 "tis better to die in the wine
 than to live in the water."*

I'll forgive you nothing,
 since you defame my death;
 and if you call me a drunkard,
 I'll call you waterlogged.
 You're the grouch of the puddles;
 I inhabit the wine cellars.
*Said the mosquito unto the frog
 from inside a vat;
 "tis better to die in the wine
 than to live in the water."*

Who do you think you are,
 Shout of the swamps and mud,
 just because swallowing me and mine,
 none can swallow you?
 Cantor of the dungheap,
 I am the blessed garnish.
*Said the mosquito unto the frog
 from inside a vat;
 "tis better to die in the wine
 than to live in the water."*

I am the angel of the grape,
 and in the cellars so cool,
 nightingale of the Saxons,
 with neither spurs nor horn.

I am always in a vat,
and you are always in a tizzy.
Said the mosquito unto the frog
from inside a vat;
“’tis better to die in the wine
than to live in the water.”]

As in the sonnet the figures of “ave” [“bird”] and “luquete” [“garnish”] are used, and once again we see religious references employed. The contrast between life and death, associated respectively with water and wine, can easily be read in religious terms. The mosquito prefers to die blessed in the wine of Christian communion rather than to live without this communion in the water, which does not satisfy him. The rejection of water, though it be “clara, limpia y pura” [“clear, clean and pure”] may also correspond to the oft-cited habit of infrequent bathing of Christians in Spain during the medieval period and later.⁸

While wine and mosquitoes appear separately in other poems by Quevedo, notably the sonnet “Al mosquito de la trompetilla” [“To the buzzing mosquito”] (II: 15 #532) along with its *décima* version “Al mosquito de trompetilla” [“To the buzzing mosquito”] (III: 220 #816), there is, as we have seen, a rich complexity present whenever the two are conjoined in their uneasy yet inevitable union. The human element brings to this equation a perspective that enlivens and complicates the situation. Both human and mosquito can be seen as equally supplemental, and it is this ambiguity that enriches the literary potential of situations described here by Quevedo. ✱

Notes

¹ The poems mentioned are “Al tabaco en polvo” (Quevedo, *Obra Poética* II: 11-12 #524); “Ruina de Roma por consentir robos de los gobernadores de sus provincias” (I: 233 #96); “El reloj de arena” (I: 270-272 #139); “Reloj de campanilla” (I:272-273 #140); and “El reloj de sol” (I: 273-274 #141).

² For dating, see Quevedo, *Obra Poética* (I: 46). The poem appears in Ignacio Arellano Ayuso’s *Poesía satírico burlesca de Quevedo* (394-395) and in José Manuel Blecua’s *Poemas escogidos de Francisco de Quevedo* (196).

³ Quevedo, *Poemas escogidos* (196); Arellano Ayuso, *Poesía satírico burlesca de Quevedo* (394).

⁴ This is found in Quevedo, *Obra Poética* (III: 149 #784).

⁵ Arellano Ayuso cites Crosby and Gaspar Lucas Hidalgo in support of this notion (395).

⁶ Blecua cites the printing data in Quevedo, *Obra poética* I: 47. The poem is found in Quevedo, *Obra poética* (III: 220 #817).

⁷ Quevedo, *Obra poética* (II: 45 #581 and II: 190 #666).

⁸ As John Crow notes, "The rugged Castilian soldiers of medieval days ... commenced to associate their own dirtiness with right religious thinking (their own, of course)... In consequence ... the Spaniards fell into the habit of not bathing, a habit which was continued until the nineteenth century" (33-34).

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