

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

Figure: After Quevedo

Of course there is an international fiscal conspiracy; of course refugee money is buying into our big industrial organizations; of course the church is attempting to gain control of government by numbers; of course names are suppressed; of course the immediate publication of names would stop most conspiracies; of course it would be libelous; of course it is unimportant what religion one takes part of; of course pagan tribes must be subjected to Christianity; of course the missionary learns more than he teaches; of course the handlers pick over the materials given for charity and steal what they fancy; of course the rich could support all charities without stress; of course they maintain poverty for this entertainment; of course charity is no measure of want; of course money is used for prestige; of course there is little prestige without it; of course the greatest thieves are the most protected; of course it is always the lesser who is caught.¹

Discoverer's Note

I found the manuscript of this remarkable prose poem, unpublished until now, while going through Williams' papers at Yale, in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. It was for me an astonishing moment of discovery in that treasure-filled library.

I was there doing research on his translation of the Spanish Golden Age novella, *El perro y la calentura* (*The Dog and the Fever*), for the publication of my edition of that work.

The poem isn't dated, but it appears to have been written in 1949 or soon after, following Williams' composition of an essay about the novella—and the publication of *Citadels of Chaos*, a treatise on economics by Cornelius Carl Veith (Pound recommended it to friends).

¹ "Figure: After Quevedo": Copyright © 2013 by the Estates of Paul H. Williams and William Eric Williams. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, agents.

The poem's content and the credit to Francisco de Quevedo, the brilliant satirist of early seventeenth-century Spain, point to that timeframe and to that Veith book.

Williams had translated the novella over the course of several years during the late 1930s and early 1940s with his Puerto Rican-born mother, Raquel Hélène Williams, who interpreted it for him. He, then, gave it an American voice—so characteristic of his own writing—but with a Spanish accent.

The poet and his mother thought they were translating a work by Quevedo. Why wouldn't they? The title page of the 1736 edition of the novella they were using as the source text stated the author was Quevedo, who had "published it under the name of Pedro Espinosa."

Originally published in 1625, the novella soon after that was misattributed to Quevedo until the late twentieth century. Now we know it actually is Espinosa's work. It does, though, contain a long verbatim passage from his friend Quevedo!

The translation project led Williams to read for the first time a good deal of Quevedo, who captivated his imagination. Quevedo's satires show his genius in using double-entendre, which is a distinguishing feature of the baroque style of writing called *conceptismo*. He is a master of it: "I give you truths in chemises / (said he) / Not far from naked" (Quevedo as rendered by Williams).

Williams calls the double-entendre wielded by Quevedo "double talk," and the act of the clever twist of thought is precisely what he himself is doing here in his "Figure: After Quevedo." His vision, of course, is of the modern world.

JONATHAN COHEN