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Symbols, Referents, and Theatrical Semantics:

The Use of Hands in the Comedia

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One of the most important products of the application of New Criticism to the *comedia* was the discovery of the functions of clusters of images to the dramatic and theatrical themes within a play. Among the most pervasive and subtle images and symbols are those involving hands and, by extension, arms, rings, gloves, and daggers. A quick, impressionistic overview of the connotations of hands reveals a number of different and often contradictory meanings: trust and treachery, power and submission, salvation and damnation, to mention only a few. So ubiquitous are hands, and so necessary are they to the plot complications in a number of plays that I would posit that only eyes are used more frequently to connect the poetic, theatrical, and symbolic threads that make up the fabric of a *comedia*.

Dar la mano, already lucidly studied in its relationship to imagery in the *comedia* (cf. Gitlitz 72-75) is a ubiquitous expression of an entire cluster of associations that includes trust, honor, and the obligations of a social contract. When an inferior asks to kiss the hand of the monarch, as with Batin and the Duke of Ferrara in *El castigo sin vengaza* (2405), the act clearly represents humiliation, submission, obedience, and respect. When two peers offer to each other their hands or arms, they are establishing a relationship based on equality, trust, commitment, and even friendship. Characters can seal a pact, establish a commitment to fulfill an obligation, and, through the various formulas for salutation, interact with the world around them, all through the uses of hands and arms.

Hands are also the symbols of legitimate power. The King bestows honor, marries a man and a woman, and metes out justice and death by his hand. For all nobles, a

hand is symbolic of their superior rank and honor. Both of these uses can be seen in *El médico de su honra*, in which Enrique's wounding of the King's hand causes Pedro to call him a traitor (3: 218) and which ends with Gutierre's famous lines:

trato en honor, y así pongo
mi mano en sangre bañada
a la puerta. . . . (3: 888-90; cf. Cruickshank)

Closely associated with power is the function to protect, a situation we see frequently when a woman enters on the hand of a man who offers his protection, his honor, in her defense (e.g., *El pintor de su deshonra*, 1: 269; *El castigo sin venganza*, 622).

Of course, these images are not uniformly good or bad, but are relative to the actions that form their environment. In *El castigo sin venganza*, *El pintor de su deshonra*, and *A secreto agravio, secreta venganza*, all three plays have men carrying women in their arms: Federico rescues Casandra (339), Alvaro abducts Serafina after Juan Roca left her in his custody (2: 956), and Lope presents the lifeless body of his murdered wife to the King (3: 928). The first example is a positive one that will turn sour because of the love engendered; the second ironic because Juan Roca unknowingly did exactly what Alvaro hoped he would do; the third both bitter and outrageous because we know that Lope had his wife killed but he lies to the king to keep his alleged dishonor quiet.

A third major association with hand and arms is love of any kind, whether erotic, filial, fraternal, or spiritual. A kiss on the hand is a visible symbol of the love relationship between two people. The hand is also a synecdoche for the beloved person, and it can easily become a symbol of the erotic love between protagonists as in the exchange from *El castigo sin venganza*:

Federico. Sola una mano suplico
que me des; dame el veneno
que me ha muerto. (2006-8)

Casandra. ...por un mano sube
 el veneno al corazón. (2014-15)

At the heart of all these associations is perhaps the most important and most potentially ambiguous one for these plays -- the hand as symbol of marriage. Giving one's hand is the universal symbol of marriage in these plays (cf. Roman *manus*). When the lady's hand is granted to the gentleman, it not only becomes the symbol of their love, but it also becomes the symbol of a legal and honorable agreement between husband and wife. The suitor asks for the woman's hand in marriage. When he receives it, he acquires prime responsibility for her safety and well-being, and he also relinquishes part of his control over his own honor. In other words, in marriage the hand acquires all three kinds of associations we have already discussed: trust and honor, power and protection, and love.

An excellent example of the multiple and contradictory associations that may be associated with hands comes when the woman's hand, symbol of her marriage and obligation, also becomes the symbol of an erotic love between her and another man. Again in *El castigo sin venganza*, Federico is originally praised for his having rescued Casandra in his arms (557-60). However, by the time of the formal meeting between Federico and Casandra (862ff.), other levels of meaning are already present in the kissing of Casandra's hand three times:

Federico. Tres veces, señora, beso
 vuestra mano: una por vos,
 con que humilde me sujeto
 a ser vuestro mientras viva,
 destos vasallos ejemplo;
 la segunda por el duque
 mi señor, a quien respeto
 obediente; y la tercera
 por mí, porque, no teniendo
 mas por vuestra obligación,
 ni menos por su preceto,
 sea de mi voluntad,
 señora, reconoceros;
 que la que sale del alma

sin fuerza de gusto ajeno,
es verdadera obediencia.

Casandra. De tan obediente cuello
sean cadena mis brazos.

Duque. Es Federico discreto. (871-89)

In this brief exchange we note the use of the hand as symbol of respect, duty, and subjugation ("humilde me sujeto"), the last of which can also refer to a traditional association of courtly love as service. When Federico uses the word "gusto", it is clearly ambiguous; the Duke seems to believe he is referring to his filial relationship to his new stepmother, thus his praise for Federico's discretion. Likewise, Casandra's embrace is at once motherly and erotic. To make sure that the audience is aware of the erotic connotations, Act I ends with Federico's admitting his desire for Casandra, and Act II opens with Casandra's lament that she should be married to the Duke and not to Federico.

This scene illustrates the concept of "informational polyphony," as Barthes called it.¹ A single signifier has at the same time a variety of meanings according to different sign systems and referents (cf. Ubersfeld 24-24, 31-32). The hand has one meaning in an anatomical system, another in a physiological system, a third in a social system, a fourth in a theatrical system, and so on. When Federico talks of subjugation, obedience, and respect, Casandra's hand refers to his position as a child of powerful parents, but it also alludes to the service we associate with courtly love and which will, over the course of play, come to connote their erotic and incestuous relationship.

This "polyphony" is a function of two different but related processes involved in the establishment of meaning. The first is the way that meaning can change over the course of a play. While one particular meaning may be established at one point in a play (a paradigmatic meaning), the connotation may easily change as the action and the environment do. For Federico and Casandra, what started out as a gesture of filial respect changed into one of erotic love. Another, more obvious, example is *El burlador de*

Sevilla, in which giving one's hand changes from the promise of marriage understood by the women, to the *burlas* perpetrated by Don Juan, to the divine judgement and sentence to hell delivered by Don Gonzalo. This kind of syntagmatic meaning is thus the product of the progression of signs over time. Ubersfeld, in *Lire le theatre* (30), notes that the vertical pile-up of simultaneous signs permits a play between the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes so that an action can say many things at once. In fact, I would submit that that is only one of the reasons for semantic simultaneity.

The second phenomenon that leads to semantic ambiguity and dramatic interest occurs when a single visual sememe may have multiple meanings at the same time in the same context. Some associations seem to be inherently more ambiguous than others, and perhaps a hint to the reason might be found in Peirce's categories of icon, index, and symbol. Each of Peirce's designations defines a relationship between the object and the referent. Indices establish contiguity between the subject and the referent, such as that between smoke and fire or, we might suppose, between a passionate kiss and erotic love; icons actually resemble the object denoted, as in the case of the actor playing the Duke of Ferrara who most likely resembled a real Duke. Symbols involve a preexisting relationship subject to sociocultural, and, in this case, theatrical, conditions (cf. Ubersfeld 27; Jakobson 10-12).

The association of the hand with courtly love, trust, or authority assumes a universe of discourse, a linking of sign and referent that we have been trained to notice (cf. Luis Prieto, *Messages et signaux* [Paris: P.U.F., 1972], cited in Ubersfeld 26-27). While such a common system for interpretation of signs is crucial for communication, especially at the connotative level, it causes ambiguity if there are contradictory referents linked to the sign, as when a hand stands for both love and punishment. Of course, it is precisely this ambiguity that allows for literary and theatrical irony.

Jakobson (81-92) has outlined six functions in verbal communication: emotive, conative, referential, phatic, metalinguistic, and poetic, half of which can be effectively

applied to nonverbal stage signs. The emotive, conative, and referential functions are immediately apparent. When both Arias and Gutierre reach for their swords in *El médico de su honra* (1: 982) their hands are clearly fulfilling an emotive function expressing the characters' anger. When the Duke of Ferrara offers his hand to Batín, or when Juan Roca points his pistol at Serafina and shoots, their hands carry a conative function, that is, the communication is focused on the addressee. A referential function has considerable similarity to Peirce's symbols in that it requires the establishment of a connection to something within our universe of discourse. An innocent audience, until it is led to believe otherwise, will accept that Federico's kissing of Casandra's hand is a gesture of respect; those of us who have read enough *comedias* have a different universe of discourse and therefore brace ourselves for the complications to follow.

Unfortunately, it is easier to agree that there is a referential function than it is to establish how the hand points to its referent. Part of the problem lies with Jakobson's poetic, phatic, and metalinguistic functions, which are much more closely linked to language than to a general system of signs. The poetic function refers to the message itself, and includes such concepts as alliteration, euphony, or other linguistic effects that have nothing to do with meaning. The phatic function assures contact between sender and receiver: "Are you there?" or a pattern familiar to the *comedia*: "Oiga." "Oigo." The metalinguistic function establishes that both sender and receiver are using a common code in understanding the communication, and may consist of phrases such as, "What do you mean?" or "¿Qué es esto?" (cf. Blue 91-93). These functions exist because language is an intentional creation (although not always created intentionally to communicate) that is capable of self-expression. Hands, although they can be used as signs, are natural phenomena that exist whether there is communication or not, whether there is a semantic code or not.

There is no inherent meaning in the offer of a hand by one person to another; a hand, unlike a word, simply does not connote anything by itself. Nevertheless, we

invest it with meaning depending on its environment and on its relationship to that environment. We establish the hand's referents without any way to verify the signifier in its own system of code. It is precisely the investment of meaning in an unintentional, nonverbal signifier that is the basis of considerable ambiguity on the stage. The hand cannot explain itself; the meaning of its appearance must be inferred by its referential environment and by other sign systems, notably verbal ones. To return to our example of Federico and Casandra, the meaning ascribed to the kissing of Casandra's hand is entirely dependent on the emotive, conative, and referential functions. Federico invests meaning into the hand that at first the Duke cannot or does not correctly and completely decode. In fact, by relying on the environment in which the gesture takes place, he assumes that it is nothing more than a grand demonstration of filial affection and capitulation of political desire on the part of Federico. He is ascribing meaning based not on any inherent semantic value of the hand itself, but rather on what he wants the hand to mean in this situation. Of course, there is no way that he can ask the hand itself what it means, implying that the hand is a mercurial sememe such more dependent on its referents and even less subject to metalinguistic and other reality testing than words which are themselves notoriously ambiguous.

Added to the inherent ambiguity of nonverbal sememes is the tendency of the characters to assume too readily that they understand what they perceive. In other words, they depend too much on the referential function, rarely checking, either verbally or by means of another system, the validity of their interpretation. When Gutierre finds Enrique's glove, he assumes the worst, adding this bit of evidence to the referential case already mounting against Mencía. We know that there is another meaning to its presence in his house, but Gutierre has privileged one possible meaning over another without any way to judge its absolute truth (cf. Ubersfeld 32). Even if Mencía didn't try to hide the truth, Gutierre might still very well not believe her because her testimony about the glove is still secondary to his perception of its meaning. His mistake results from his inability to ask the glove itself what it means coupled

with his certainty that he does, in fact, know the truth.

This excessive faith in one's ability to deduce the truth from the natural environment (the referents) is a common theme in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century literature, and there is no reason to doubt that the actions of these characters illustrated the same moral point as more direct treatises such as Sánchez's *Que nada se sabe*. There is a certain fatal hubris demonstrated by those who claim to know the truth, and it almost always has unfortunate consequences. The use of important nonverbal signifiers in the *comedia* is, I believe, an excellent philosophical and dramatic lesson in epistemology and morality, intended to warn us of the dangers of overconfidence in our understanding of the world around us.

NOTE

1. *Essais critiques*, cited in Ubersfeld 19. Cf. Blue, who also discusses the thirteen sign systems in theater proposed by Tadeusz Kowzan in *El teatro y su crisis* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1969), 25-51.

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