

The Archpriest of Hita's "Dueñas Chicas" and the *Mulierculas* of Latin Preachers

Este ensayo pretende demostrar cómo las "dueñas chicas" del Libro de buen amor (manuscrito S, coplas 1606-1617) pueden relacionarse con las mujercillas o mulierculas (es decir, la forma plural, diminutiva y a menudo despectiva de mulier en latín) que se critican como pecadoras en la Segunda Epístola de San Pablo a Timoteo (3.6), según la Vulgata. Existe una larga tradición de comentarios, y sobre todo sermones medievales - entre otras obras devotas y moralizantes - que citan este pasaje bíblico con el propósito de menospreciar a algunas mujeres que se consideran pecaminosas y que, por tanto, adquieren el título de mulierculas. Las acusan de entregarse a hombres hipócritas que llegan a seducirlas y corromperlas bajo pretextos religiosos. El Arcipreste de Hita parece aludir irónicamente a esta tradición cuando se dirige al público ("Quiero vos abreviar, señores, la predicación") para elogiar a las "dueñas chicas," la "muger chica," "pequeña" y "pequeñuela." De esta manera, el narrador parodia el texto de San Pablo como fuente de predicación, transformando el menosprecio de los predicadores en una celebración de las cualidades superiores de las mulierculas.¹

One of the most celebrated passages in the *Libro de buen amor* (*Libro*) comes near the end of the poem, following a sermonic allegory on the Christian soldier wielding virtuous arms to defend against the Devil, the World, and the Flesh. Abruptly, the narrator addresses himself to the audience, announcing that he intends to shorten his preaching. This, of course, as Olga Impey and Colbert Nepaulsingh discuss, follows a common medieval *topos* in which speakers and writers promised *brevitas* or concision as a means of anticipating and avoiding the *fastidium* or boredom of their listeners and readers. What follows is a hilarious sequence, appearing in the Salamanca version (Ms. S) under the rubric "De las propiedades que las dueñas chicas han," in which the Archpriest likens discursive brevity to the eroticized smallness of women:

Quiero vos abreviar, señores, la predicación,
que sienpre me pagué de pequeño sermón

e de dueña pequeña e de breve rrazón,
ca poco e bien dicho, afinca se el coraçón.

Del que mucho fabla rríen, quien mucho rríe es loco;
es en la dueña chica amor *grande* e non poco;
dueñas *di* grandes que *por chicas*, por grandes chicas non troco;
mas las chicas e las grandes se arrepienten del troco.

De las chicas que bien diga el Amor me fizo rruego,
que diga de sus noblezas; yo quiero las dezir luego;
dezir vos he de dueñas chicas, que lo avredes por juego:
son frías como la nieve, e arden commo el fuego.

Son frías de fuera, con el amor ardientes;
en la cama solaz, trebejo, plasenteras, rrientes;
en casa cuerdas, donosas, sosegadas, bien fazientes;
mucho ál y fallaredes, adó bien paráredes mientes.

En pequeña girgonça yaze grand rresplandor;
en açucar muy poco yaze mucho dulçor;
en la dueña pequeña yaze muy grand amor;
pocas palabras cunplen al buen entendedor.

Es pequeño el grano de la buena pemienta,
pero más que la nuez conorta e caliente;
así dueña pequeña, si todo amor consienta,
non ha plazer del mundo que en ella non sienta.

Commo en chica rrosa está mucha color,
e en oro muy poco grand preçio e grand valor,
commo en poco blasmo yaze grand buen olor,
ansí en dueña chica yaze muy grand sabor.

Como rrobí pequeño tiene mucha bondat,
color, virtud e preçio e noble claridad,
ansí dueña pequeña tiene mucha beldat,
fermosura, donaire, amor e lealtad.

Chica es la calandria e chico el rruiseñor,
pero más dulçe *cantan* que otra ave mayor;
la muger que es chica por eso es mejor;
con doñeo es más dulçe que açucar nin flor.

Son aves *pequeñuelas* papagayo e orior,
 pero qual quier dellas es dulce gritador,
 adonada, hermosa, preciada, cantador,
 bien atal es la dueña pequeña con amor.

De la muger pequeña non hay comparación,
 terrenal paraíso es, e grand consolaçión,
 solaz, e alegría, plazer, e bendición;
 mejor es en la prueba, que en la salutaçión.

Siempre quis muger chica, más que grande nin mayor;
 non es desaguisado del grand mal ser foidor;
 del mal tomar, lo menos, díselo el sabidor;
 por ende de las mugeres la mejor es la menor. (1606-1617)²

Much has been written on the poet's ingenious comparisons with the heat of a compact fire, the spice of a tiny pepper corn, the voice of little songbirds, the brilliance of precious jewels and petite flower petals - before he admits that when it comes to the greatness of "dueñas chicas ... non ha comparación" (st. 1615a). This particular section in the *Libro de buen amor* not only attracted the attention of early audiences such as readers of late medieval *Cancioneros* (Gerli, "On the Edge"), but also inspired a translation by the nineteenth-century North American poet and Hispanist, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. On the one hand, these verses serve to praise the more intense sensuality of smaller women, insisting that less is more when it comes to their intimate companionship. On the other hand, the Archpriest finishes his comically abbreviated sermon with the observation that it is always preferable to commit a lesser sin (among other negative connotations of the word "mal") - in this case, by fornicating with a smaller woman rather than a larger mistress. In other words, less is at the same time less, and therefore better from the standpoint of reducing as well as reveling in carnal love. In the pages that follow, my purpose is to show how the Archpriest alludes subversively to an age-old, and at times misogynistic, tradition of sermonizing against sinful *mulierculas* of the kind described in the Vulgate Bible. Literally meaning "little women," the diminutive suffix of this Latin term is also used in Jerome's scriptural translation to convey a pejorative sense of belittlement (Nelson 203).

Over the years, critics have taken different approaches to investigating the well-known "dueñas chicas" passage in the *Libro*. A number of studies have identified possible precedents or analogues,

derived both from Eastern and Western sources. María Rosa Lida de Malkiel traced the humorous notion of smaller women resulting in less vice back to classic texts by Plautus and Plutarch (26-27). She observes that the same kind of joke may also be found in the eleventh-century Arabic *Siraj-al-Muluk* (Light of Kings) by Abu Bakrat of Tortosa and the twelfth-century Hebrew *Sefer Sha'ashu'im* (Book of Delights) by Joseph ibn Zabara. Critics like Luce López-Baralt and Michelle Hamilton have observed that, based on portrayals of feminine beauty in the *Libro*, its author was probably aware of qualities considered attractive in Andalusí culture, in addition to visions of the ideal woman promoted by Christian writers.³ Francisco Rico has at the same time related the “dueñas chicas” to a description of hot-blooded small women in a satirical Latin work that likely influenced the Castilian poem, which he cites as the pseudo-Ovidian *De remedio amoris* and offers as “Si brevis est, forsan per singula membra superbit, / Uritur interius, corde superba furit” [If she is short, perhaps she is haughty in all of her members; inside she is inflamed, proud in her heart she rages] (307). It has also been noted by G.B. Gybbon-Monypenny that the Archpriest playfully explores this idea of the heightened potency of smaller women - apparently common among Christians, Muslims, and Jews living on the Peninsula - from the standpoint of a Ciceronian proverb that was often falsely attributed to Aristotle during the Middle Ages, “ex malis eligere minima oportere” [of two evils choose the lesser] (443, n. 1617c)

A number of studies have shed additional light on how medieval clerical learning and culture seems to have informed the passage. Specifically, Lida de Malkiel and Vincent Cantarino have examined how the Archpriest humorously suppresses and then equivocates the meaning of a syllogistic premise inherent in his praise of “dueñas chicas” - that is, the received truth that all women are potentially a source of vice due, supposedly, to their fallen nature, regardless of physical size relative to other members of the same sex. In this sense, the first “little woman” was Eve, who brought about Original Sin through her openness to corruption that medieval thinkers linked to the inherited pitfalls in human language and sexuality.⁴ More recently, Jeremy Lawrence has built on the insights of Lida de Malkiel and Cantarino to demonstrate how the poem categorizes the “propiedades” of small women through a typically scholastic exposition of internal and external qualities and complexions. By evoking the virtues of little women, and describing how their inner heat fortifies or “conorta e más caliente,” the narrator translates and parodically redeploys Latin terms like *virtus* and *confortare*. In his comparative essay, Lawrence points out that these words were similarly utilized as descriptors in encyclopedic works from the period such as the

De proprietatibus rerum, as well as manuals focused on the qualities of plants or stones like the *Lapidario* compiled by Alfonso X.⁵ The poem similarly retools language extracted from the Vulgate Bible, most strikingly in his description of Don Amor reciting fragments of the canonical hours in the context of seduction and lovemaking, and a later echo of St. Paul urging the Thessalonians to “try all things” (“probar todas las cosas el apostol manda”) as the narrator sets out on an erotic foray into the mountains (1 Thess. 5:21; 950a). In keeping with Love’s travesty of phrases from the Divine Office, the Archpriest elliptically subverts the subsequent injunction in the Apostle’s letter to “hold fast to the good, and abstain from all evil” (1 Thess. 5:22).

For early audience members attuned to this kind of irreverent humor in the *Libro*, another parodic allusion to the Latin epistles of Paul might be implicated in the Archpriest’s tribute to smaller ladies, although it has gone unnoticed by modern critics. In a text that anticipates his own death, the Apostle warned his disciple Timothy of the seductive hypocrisy that will usher in the End Times:

In the last days shall come dangerous times / men shall be lovers of themselves, covetous (*ipsos amantes cupidi*) ... blasphemers, disobedient ... wicked ... slanderous, incontinent ... traitors ... and lovers of pleasure (*voluptatum amatores*) more than of God: / Having an appearance indeed of godliness but denying the power thereof. Now these avoid. / For of these sort are they who creep into houses and lead captive little women (*mulierculas*) laden with sins, who are led away with divers desires: / Ever learning, and never attaining to the knowledge of the truth. (2 Tim. 3:1-7)

Apart from the image of “divers desires” burning within “little women,” thematic connections between this epistle and the *Libro* are clear enough: the accusations made against Don Amor correlate with those leveled at “lovers of pleasure,” who, like the poet, are characterized by their dedication to seducing members of the opposite sex. In keeping with the false “knowledge” and “learning” of those whom Paul calls *voluptatum amatores*, the Archpriest here and elsewhere employs his scholastic training and mastery of *mester de clerecía* poetics in pursuit of lust - but at other times in his polysemous work seeks redemption through displays of devotion, and offers the poem as a guide to the truth of God’s love. In this context, Castilian terms employed to advertise erotically “dueñas chicas,” the “muger chica,” “pequeña,” and “pequeñuela,” might well evoke ironically Paul’s warning against *mulierculas* and their seducers in much the same way as the poet’s earlier determination to “probar todas las cosas” reverses the meaning of the Apostle’s recommendation that

Christians try, test or prove all things, but remaining always true to the good, “omnia autem probate quod bonum est tenete” (1 Thess. 5:21). Thus, the narrator satirically identifies with a Biblical writer known for cautioning his readers against the ever-present lure of carnal temptations.⁶

Following the comparatist approach of Lawrence, additional links between interpretations of the Second Epistle to the Timothy and the Archpriest’s “dueñas chicas” are suggested by the frequent and widespread citation of Paul’s *mulierculas* by Latin writers throughout the Middle Ages. Sylvia Parsons and David Townsend have studied an example from a tenth-century play that dramatizes the *Life of St. Thais the Harlot* (*Vita S. Thais meretricis*) from the *Vitas Patrum*. This text has been attributed to the German nun Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, best known among Hispanists for her early account of the martyrdom of Pelagius of Cordoba (Jordan 23). Her treatment of St. Thais echoes Jerome’s use of the diminutive *mulierculas* to describe the lowly feminine status of the prostitute prior to being converted. This conversion comes about when a confessor enters the brothel to redeem her, unlike other clients who are motivated by lechery - in other words, the kind of men that Paul condemns as “lovers of pleasure ... who creep into houses and lead captive little women laden with sins” (3:4-6).⁷ In additional hagiographic works by the same author, Parsons and Townsend find that a designation of womanly “frailty, weakness, and inferiority” is also employed to convey rhetorically the *humilitas* of the female writer, or contradicted by holy virgins who are wrongly denounced as “viles mulierculae” before being glorified as martyrs (428). This can be compared to the lives of male saints in better known collections, such as the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend), which recounts how Peter was falsely accused of “consorting with common people and little women (*mulierculas*) whom you wean from their husbands’ beds” (Voragine 345). In addition to the moral and linguistic diminishment of females in Jerome’s translation of the Bible and other works of the Church Fathers, scholars have noticed how medieval writers increasingly adapted the Vulgate term *mulierculas* to convey also a lower social class.⁸ Implied in the legend of Peter, this meaning is explicitly attached to the word in a commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the letters of Paul: “et dicit, ‘mulierculas,’ quia magnae dominae habent aliquos consiliarios, unde non possunt se duci. Sed hae sunt tali auxilio destitutae” [and it is said, ‘little women,’ because great ladies have some male counselors, while these have none to guide them, but are deprived of such help] (635). Due to this lack of protection, lower class women were seen as especially vulnerable to being, in the words of the Apostle, “led away” by sinful advisers who falsify the “appearance” of “godliness.” Such “lovers of pleasure” could not only take advantage of the supposed debility of their

sex, but also the inability of socially inferior females to retain good counsel and thereby protect and defend themselves against seducers like Don Amor and his Archpriest disciple. Also inherent in the diminutive suffix attached to *mulier*, from the standpoint of medieval schoolmen, was the Aristotelian notion of woman as “incomplete” (MacLehose 35).

In his consideration of such representations of *mulierculas* in premodern culture, Robert Lerner concludes that “the citation of Paul’s Second Epistle to Timothy in polemic against presumed hypocrites was a medieval commonplace” (305). Lerner provides evidence from a number of well-known writers, dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. One of these is the Dominican, William Perault, whose popular *Summa de virtutibus et vitiis* (*Summa on Virtues and Vices*, c. 1240) probably influenced the sermon that immediately precedes the “dueñas chicas” section of the *Libro* (see Gerli “Don Amor”). Perault preached that the *mulierculas* depicted by Paul wantonly continue to expose themselves to hypocritical, heretical wolves disguised as sheep (Lerner 305). His accusation brings to mind the Archpriest’s portrayal of Don Amor as a wolf who visits and makes love to female acolytes in time with the canonical hours, in the episode mentioned earlier. As Frank Domínguez has shown, it was customary to associate this animal with lusty clerics and worldly friars like those satirized by the poet.⁹ Another example may be found in the 1256 *Tractatus brevis de periculis novissorum temporum* (*Brief Treatise on the Dangers of the Most Recent Times*). Written by William of Saint-Amour, a doctor of canon law at the University of Paris, this text specifically accuses friars of taking advantage of *mulierculas* like the ones described in the biblical epistle.

An even more influential thirteenth-century scholar from Paris, Philip the Chancellor, wrote a sermon in which he identifies Paul’s “lovers of pleasure” and guilty “little women” as members of lay religious movements that were spreading south from Germany and Northern France. He warns against groups of men and women known to meet suspiciously together under the guise of shared devotion: “periculosa est quorundam religio qui in conclavi cum mulierculis conveniunt et colloquuntur: sicut dicuntur facere Beghuini et Bagarbi” [they dangerously worship behind closed doors; some meet and have exchanges with little women, as is said of Beguines and Beghards] (fol. 296v). During the first half of the fourteenth century, these groups were often accused of depravity and heresy, and faced persecution by Church authorities. In the case of the Beguines, their alleged susceptibility to error was connected to the idea of female openness in other kinds of medieval discourse that problematized women, including what Michael Solomon has called a “literature of misogyny” (1-16). The lay religious movements in question

typically consisted of widows like the Archpriest's Doña Endrina, or other single women, along with lower class tradesmen and rural peasants and their wives. The infamy of these groups in medieval Spain may be seen most famously in a manuscript of the *Conde Lucanor* recently studied by Mike Hammer which tells the story of a "beguina" whose poisonous lies result in the murder of a married couple and the vindictive slaying of their relatives. On the Peninsula and elsewhere, so-called Beguines and their male counterparts ("beguinas" and "beguinos") were sometimes conflated with disreputable members of the tertiary Franciscans, and more generally linked with potentially heretical free-thinking, dangerous mixing of the sexes, examples of false piety and dissent from orthodoxy that sometimes attracted ordained supporters as well.

To be sure, the prevalence of references to Paul's *mulierculas* in Latin preaching during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries coincides with growing anxieties over and reactions against specifically female expressions of lay spirituality in Western Christendom. Not surprisingly, even the noble Elizabeth of Hungary was subject to such denunciations in response to her claim of having received the stigmata. Promoted by the controversial Third Order of St. Francis, Elizabeth was suspected of being a hypocritical Beguine by Gilbert of Tournai, another mid-thirteenth-century master at the University of Paris: "There is one among the wretched little women (*mulierculas*) of this sort, and the public rumor already arose that she is signed with the stigmata of Christ. But if this is true, it should not be fostered in hidden places, but should be known openly; if it is not true, the hypocrisy and pretense should be confounded" (Elliott 198). Preachers were often quick to belittle devout women as *mulierculas* when they claimed to experience personal visions and miracles, and sometimes went on to accuse them of the most outlandish acts of heretical debauchery. For example, in a history of the year 1339, the Swiss chronicler John of Winterthur wrote of a Beghard who supposedly confessed to instructing a trio of "little women" to strip naked and have sex with him as a means to illustrate the concept of the Trinity. This story constitutes an extreme, yet telling, example of how Paul's image of seducible *mulierculas* might be exploited by medieval writers. As Anke Passenier puts it in her study of representations of women during the Middle Ages, well-known sermons like those of Philip the Chancellor provide ample evidence of how this traditional stereotype worked:

The idea that heresy is accompanied by immorality, lechery and hypocrisy, and that women in particular are easily misled by heretics because of their simplicity and seducibility, can be traced all through the history of Christianity ... A certain passage in the New Testament, 2 Timothy 3, functioned as an often repeated *locus*

classicus. This passage criticizes the conduct of false prophets entering the houses of “little women,” who are described as laden with sin and eager for their false teachings ... descriptions of beguines who literally fell into the hands of heretical preachers rely on the long-lived stereotype of the “seducible woman.” (71-72)

Situating the “dueñas chicas” in this larger context suggests that the Archpriest is ironically praising a conception of little women that was closely associated with Paul’s letter. The *Libro* thus subverts a longstanding tradition of quoting and commenting on this *locus classicus*. It has been shown how earlier Latin writers drew on the *mulierculas* topic to expose the lechery of phony preachers devoting themselves to sexual congress with what Passenger calls “seducible women,” while pretending to share their spiritual love for the Gospel and teach Church doctrine. Having just finished a conventional sermon on the dangers of the Devil, the World, and the Flesh, the Archpriest addresses both male and female members in his audience, identified over the course of his poem as “dueñas y mujeres,” “damas,” “señoras,” “el hombre o la mujer,” and “señores” (Prologue lines 83-84 , 679c, 1573a, 161b, 114b, 1606a). As we have seen, the narrator promises to cut short his “predicación” in a way that links the extent of his verbal discourse to the size of female bodies represented in it (1606a). The mock preacher then brings his scholastic skills to bear on eulogizing the erotic potency of smaller lovers, rather than repeating commonplace, misogynistic warnings against the moral weakness of *mulierculas*. By poetically rendering this Vulgate word as “dueñas chicas,” the “muger chica,” “pequeña,” and “pequeñuela,” he avoids the more pejorative terms “mugerciellas” and “mugerçillas” that can be found in medieval Castilian translations of Paul’s letter.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, later fictional uses of the words “mugercillas” and “mujercillas” are usually demeaning, and sometimes also charged with suggestive innuendo in works ranging from the *Arcipreste de Talavera o Corbacho* to *Lazarillo de Tormes*.¹¹ This diminishing designation may also be found in Spanish condemnations of fifteenth and sixteenth-century *beatas* that cite the same epistle as earlier Latin preaching against alleged Beguines and their male promoters.¹²

For this reason, the Archpriest’s pseudo-sermonic eulogy on small ladies may be correlated with Michael Gerli’s recent interpretation of the poem as a veritable minefield of “heretical thinking” (“Reading Error” 256). Gerli finds that the *Libro* repeatedly tests audiences by purposefully engaging in wrong choices and flirting with doctrinal error, to include recurrent misapplications of Biblical language. In the case of the misapplication that I have been discussing, the Archpriest transforms a Latin diminutive used for conveying the moral weakness of lesser women

into a vernacular celebration of the greatness of “dueñas chicas.” As Gerli has also shown (“Image on the Edge”), together with other critics, these verses were particularly popular among early audiences of the *Libro* and imitated by *Cancionero* poets.¹³ Some medieval readers and listeners were no doubt aware of the Archpriest’s implicit reversal of traditional preaching against *mulierculas* and their consorts. His praise advertently misuses this scriptural image in order to deny, and at the same time play on, the seducible openness of so-called “little women.” In this way, the poet makes light of the same kind of hypocritical pleasure-seeking that was so often denounced in Latin sermons.

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NOTES

- 1 I shall continue to cite the word grammatically as it appears in Paul’s letter as opposed to adapting the case.
- 2 All citations are from the edition of G.B. Gybbon-Monypenny. Italicized words are present in the Toledo version (Ms. T), but not in S.
- 3 On *andalusí* approaches to feminine beauty, see especially the studies of Luce López-Baralt.
- 4 According to M. L. Mattox (54), Martin Luther followed medieval exegetes in associating Paul’s notion of the “little woman” with the weakness of Eve in the Garden of Eden: “simplicia muliercula / infirma Eva” (2 Timothy 3.6)
- 5 Lawrence notes that this context is seen in the language of the earlier-mentioned rubric on the “propiedades” of little women in the S manuscript of the *Libro*.
- 6 After undergoing a difficult process of conversion, Paul is able to become righteously “all things to all people” - without fully escaping what is described as a “thorn in the flesh” (1 Cor. 9:22; 2 Cor. 12:7). In his prologue to the *Libro* found only in Ms. S, the Archpriest indirectly references (by quoting from the “Clementinas” canon law) the theme of firmness in faith as expressed in Romans and other of the Apostle’s letters: “Buena obra es comienzo e fundamento ... do éste non est çimiento, non se puede fazer obra firme nin firme hedifício, segund dize el Apóstol” (lines 140-45).
- 7 As in the lives of other female saints, her post-conversion humanity is expressed with the masculine *homo* (Parsons and Townsend 428).
- 8 As Janet L. Nelson notes in her study of the written Latin of the Franks, “*muliercula* is used in a pejorative sense, regardless of class” (203).
- 9 On representations of the sexual profligacy of the Spanish clergy in the *Libro*, see the essay by Anthony Zahareas.

- 10 Castilian translations of Bible translations made in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries vernacularized the word *mulierculas* as “mugerciellas” and “mugercillas,” respectively (Enrique-Arias).
- 11 María Cruz Muriel Tapia has touched on the way in which the Archpriest’s light-hearted approach to portraying “dueñas chicas” contrasts with medieval anti-feminist discourse (30-33). The negative connotations of this sort of woman take the form of a demonic seduction in the *Corbacho*: “una mugercilla miserable, e deseo della, quiere darse todo al diablo” (22). The term appears in the fourth *tratado* of *Lazarillo de Tormes*: “un fraile de la Merced, que las mujercillas que digo me encaminaron” (112). On the sexual innuendos of this episode in *Lazarillo*, see George Shipley. The word “mujercillas” came to be closely associated with prostitution during the early modern period (Terreros y Pando 1.635).
- 12 On portrayals of late medieval religious women in Spain through the *muliercula* topic, see Ronald Surtz (156). Concerning Teresa de Jesús and her detractors later using the term “mujercilla,” see, for example, Alison Webber (18-38). Both the Latin and Spanish terms had long been employed to denounce the alleged superstitions or other religious pretenses of women (Keitt 55).
- 13 On early receptions of the *Libro* more generally, see the work of John Dagenais. Scholars have considered early receptions and imitations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, whether directly or indirectly modeled on the Archpriest’s poem. In addition to Michael Gerli’s study of visual imagery in the *Cancionero de Palacio*, see the study of José L. Labrador Herráiz and Ralph A. Di Franco, as well as that of López-Baralt (“Juan Ruiz y el morisco Tarfe”).

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