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Grace Alvarez-Altman
The College at Brockport

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POLY-ANTHROPONOMICAL TECHNIQUE IN BUERO VALLEJO'S DRAMA *LAS MENINAS*

Grace Alvarez-Altman

Twenty-five years after the Civil War (1936–1939), known as the “Little World War” in Spain, the United States brought Antonio Buero Vallejo to visit American colleges and universities as part of its cultural exchange program. He has been a special guest at the Modern Language Association meetings numerous times. His play *Las Meninas*, acclaimed to be his masterpiece out of his over 35 classical plays, is also the name of the masterpiece painting by the famous Velázquez, who revolutionized art by introducing the technique of painting the atmosphere, light and space. Buero uses the literary onomastic technique we call *poly-anthroponomical*, in which one entity or character uses many different names in a subtle manner, thus making it fall within a particular realm of ontology. This technique is not to be confused with categories of names (chimerical, puns, etc.). The main character of *Las Meninas* is Velázquez, carefully researched by Buero Vallejo, who is a professional painter himself. He kept his sanity during his seven years in jail after the Civil War by painting portraits of inmates. The play was censored by Franco for two years, but finally, in the 300th anniversary of Velázquez, it was premiered in 1960. Hypocrisy, conflict between Church and State, superstition, exploitation of the poor, and taxation to the limit are exposed.

One of the challenges of giving a paper on literary onomastics is that the audience has often not read the work and so we must give a synopsis of the plot. Velázquez is preparing to paint *Las Meninas* (“Maids of Honor,” a Portuguese word for “girls”), after completing a nude painting of Venus. His enemies complain to the Inquisition about the nude; he is called before the King, and the King asks him to destroy the painting. When he refuses, the King pardons him. All characters are historical except the two beggars who open the play reminiscing about how, sixteen years ago, they were models for Velázquez. Pedro, the 82-year-old, blind beggar, will visit Velázquez. All characters are given fictitious names except royalty. The scenes change so frequently from the balcony of the Palace, to the street, to Velázquez’ house, and then to the Palace chambers of the King, that as you sit in the audience hearing and seeing the play it seems almost a movie, which makes it a spectacular play that ends with a tableau of the painting.

The painting, reproduced at the end of this essay, contains four levels or parallel planes, moving from the foreground to the background and from the bottom of the painting toward the top. On the First Level, in the foreground, the most prominent subject is the dog, Leon (“from two Latin words, Legio and Gemina, [meaning] audacious and valiant soldier”), the name of a ferocious animal but here tamed, representing the worship and love of animals such as cats by Egyptians, snakes, etc. The tiny fourteen-year-old midget whose foot is on top of the dog is the greatest gossip in the court, much like the soap operas of our times. His name is Nicolasillo, “-illo” being a diminutive suffix. True to his name, “Victorious,” he has microscopic eyesight and is called “Vista de Lanza.” In contrast to the midget’s dainty proportions are those of the blocklike, deformed, female dwarf who stands beside him. These three characters of Level One represent the concept of Abuse of a Handicap and the Weakest in our Society. Martin, the ex-model for Velázquez’ painting of the Greek fabulist Menippo, is part of this concept.

On Level Two of the painting is portrayed the central figure of the famous Infanta Margarita (“pearl”), about five years old, who later married the German Emperor Leopold I. She radiates an unusual light effect never before seen in a painting. To Margarita’s right is the older of the *meninas*, offering the little princess water in a *búcaro* or mug. To the princess’ left is the sixteen-year-old *menina* called Agustina (“sacred,” from the Latin patronymic Agustino). This group represents the venerable reverence for the divine right of kings. The main concept of this group is how children, youth, and young adults are innocent victims of the people portrayed in Level Four through affectations, overindulgence, ignorance, fear, forced submission, and isolation from reality. Juana Pacheco, Velázquez’ wife, is part of this concept, as shown in the play though not present in the painting.

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On the Third Level to the viewer's right are two adult figures. In the play the woman is named Marcela, whose name is a "feminine patronymic Latin derivative of Marcos from 'marte,' [meaning] 'resplendent.'" She is the chaperone to the three characters in Level Two. Marcela is dressed as a nun, a typical costume of widows in the 17th century. In the play she prides herself on being the most religious and pious of all the ladies in the Court. In reality she pursues Velázquez and is a victim of unrequited love from him, causing her to be constantly jealous of the relationship that Velázquez has with the older princess, Maria Teresa, 18, who never appears on the scene and is a purely intellectual individual, to the dismay of her father, King Phillip IV. The figure beside Marcela in the painting, near the wall, is Diego, an escort and counselor for ladies of the Court. Diego, from Jacobus, "supplanter," also manipulates a Guard, who is his puppet. Added to this couple, we perceive in the play other Guards; John Pareja, Velázquez' ex-slave; and Velázquez' companion and son-in-law John. The personal name John, originally from Hebrew, is the most popular name among the Saints because it is the name of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. "Yahve" ("Jehovah is merciful") is used for both characters who sympathize with Velázquez, but in the play, even though they do not intrinsically belong to this level, they still give the impression of pure hypocrisy and shaded truths, associated with Level Three.

Also on Level Three to the left is the main character of the painting and the play, Velázquez himself. Historically and dramatically they are both the same entity. Velázquez is the famous painter envied by all other painters in the play and even by the King, a painter himself. A subtle autobiographical innuendo of Buero is perceived in this character of the play *Las Meninas*. Velázquez was such a genius that no one dared or tried to imitate him. Of course, Goya was inspired by him, and there is a *Las Meninas* by Picasso in the Picasso Museum in Madrid. In 1865 Manet, the French painter, called Velázquez "the painter of painters." I predict that in the future we will call Buero (the Velázquez in the play) "the dramatist of dramatists in Spain."

The Fourth Level of this 13 foot tall and 9 foot wide painting is highly criticized in the play by all the Palace painters. They accuse Velázquez of portraying King Phillip IV as a weak personality while showing disrespect towards the nobility. In the painting, with a rare genius, we see King Phillip and his second wife Mariana reflected in the mirror. Phillip, from the Greek "friend or lover of horses" and true to his name, is the King who, after knowing the facts of the corruption of all of his subjects, still befriends them who are worse than animals. Mariana ("kind and blessed") is a character whose only ambition was to give the King an heir and be pampered. This she did accomplish in the play, to the detriment of others. Even though King Phillip IV was one of the most forceful and humanitarian royal characters, not representative of the Inquisition (representing bigotry) in Spain, the painting shows only his reflection in the mirror. Buero gives him the respect and admiration he deserves for his compassion and understanding of Velázquez. To the right of the mirror, seen through the open door, is the cousin of Velázquez, José, a name from the Hebrew meaning "God will add." He is easily recognizable despite the distance and the decrease in size and light. We are not trying to emphasize the etymology or linguistic aspect of the name, but their psychological and sociological force in the cosmic world.

José, member of the Inquisition, unjustly accused Velázquez of a terrible wrong in order to gain his position and discredit him forever. Velázquez' great sin was a painting of the nude Venus lying down and looking into a mirror. In the play we learn that the King had over thirty illegitimate children and is accused of adultery by his brilliant daughter Princess Maria Teresa (not pictured in the painting). To this level of hypocrisy, permissiveness, and adultery belong another nine characters in the play who are not portrayed in the painting: a priest; Nardi; an eighty-year-old painter of the Palace, jealous of Velázquez; the Marquis; a high-ranking householder of the Palace; and four others with no personal names (usher, mayor or judge, and two bailiffs).

In 1971 the Metropolitan Museum in New York City (the neighborhood where I grew up) purchased the John Pareja portrait (his ex-slave) for five and a half million dollars. The sympathetic attention to the

conditions of life and the patterns of belief shown in this painting and reflected in the four levels of *Las Meninas* are also evident in the Spain of Franco. Early in the career of Buero Vallejo as a dramatist, starting in the year 1946, he won literary awards for his plays *Las Palabras en la Arena* and *Historia de una Escalera*. He is still going strong at the age of 72. He was also accused, like Velázquez in the play, of insubordination, but now he is most popular and highly respected as a dramatist of profound truths. King Phillip IV showed incredible liberality and affability toward Velázquez, whose studio he visited daily to watch him paint. By 1652, Velázquez became the Harbinger of King Phillip, one who arranges his lodgings during his travels. In the painting he holds his palette in his left hand and the brush in his right. In his belt are the royal chamber keys and that of *Aposentador*. The Cross of the Order of Santiago is on his breast. Some say that the King painted the cross himself after Velázquez' death. His surname in the play, true to history, is a patronymic, not of Visigothic origin as some would have it, but from the Basque *Belasco* (a Sephardic surname), coming from "Belas-Ko," a toponym. "Ko" is a suffix of origin, coming from "the lower meadow (pasture-field)." When I first saw the painting in its huge proportions of 13 feet high and 9 feet wide, I sensed the proud-looking figure of Velázquez making a statement to us: "Here I am, and I made this." Listen to his words in the play during his Inquisition trial when he receives the news of the death of Pedro, the elderly blind beggar who was the only one with whom he could converse openly, who represented with him Truth and Realistic Integrity:

King: What are you saying?

Velázquez: It's a choice, sir. On one hand the lie one more time. A tempting lie: it can only be to my advantage. On the other hand, the truth. A dangerous truth that won't remedy anything. Pedro told me before I came here: lie if need be. You should paint. [His voice breaks.] ... What can I give to be worthy of him and his unjustifiable death? I can no longer lie, even though I should. His death prevents it. I offer you my futile truth [vibrantly], the truth, sir, of my profound, my persistent rebellion.

With Velázquez on Level Three–A goes the character Pedro (not shown in the painting), representing the blindness of man, an inability to see and understand his predicament, and also Maria Teresa, the 18-year-old Princess, betrothed to marry the promiscuous French King Louis XIV, who, at the risk of being jailed permanently in a convent, dares to defend Velázquez and exonerate herself. This play represents the personification of Good vs. Evil: twenty-two characters on the side of Evil, and three on that of Good. A last look at the painting will show Velázquez – Truth – standing alone in his personal studio surrounded by Evil or Lies and innocent victims. Evil is represented in all its proliferations, from half-truths or shaded truths to stark, unequivocal evil. As we group the characters in the play, the subtle personifications of the two main antagonists. Truth and Evil are ingeniously developed by the technique known as *poly-anthropomical*.

Once again the literary onomastic microscope shows us Velázquez as a universal force of frustrated truths, freed at last because the truth is what makes man free. The true and only protagonist in this play is Truth "which has no soul." At the end Velázquez is really saying, "Try to keep your light of integrity burning, because at the end that's all we have."

State University of New York
College at Brockport

