

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE OF GALDÓS'S *LA DESHEREDADA*

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Recent criticism has established a significant connection between the content of Galdós's *La desheredada* and the contemporary political skirmishes taking place between Antonio Cánovas del Castillo and Práxedes Mateo Sagasta in late 1880 and early 1881. The seemingly enigmatic references in *La desheredada* to the "petardos," the "irregularidades," the "abonarés," and the "subvenciones" are, for example, actually subtle but potent allusions to damaging scandals in the Cánovas government that Spanish Liberals were uncovering in the months before the fall of the Conservative regime on February 8, 1881 (Schnepf "The Significance" and "History"). Now, as this essay will demonstrate, there is reason to suspect that these same heated political skirmishes likewise provided Galdós with the controversial title of this novel.¹

In 1880 the Spanish literary world was aware that Galdós was working on an important new project, but even close friends were unsure of the content and the title of the work in progress. On September 27, 1880, José Ortega Munilla, one of Galdós's most fervent admirers and editor of *Los Lunes de El Imparcial*, announced to his readers that Pérez Galdós was preparing a novel in which he would attack the deleterious affects of alcohol.² Ortega, however, makes no mention of the title until a letter to Galdós probably written on January 16, 1881.³ "La desheredada," exclaims the editor, "¿Cuándo lloraré con ella?" (Nuez y Schraibman 192).

Keeping these dates in mind, we note that in early January, 1881 the battle between Cánovas and Sagasta was intensifying daily.⁴ The brash and impudent Liberals, on the verge of assuming power for the first time during the Restoration, were anxious to engage the "canoveros" at every possible juncture. On January 10, Galdós's close friend, the Liberal Fernando León y Castillo, sparked a heated debate in the Sala de Diputados with the following comments:

Quién duda que sería un suceso fausto para vosotros [los conservadores] la ausencia de los partidos liberales del campo de la legalidad? Eso no lo duda nadie: habéis hecho todo lo posible para conseguirlo; y es que queréis quedarnos solos, porque quedándenos solos vivís más holgados, y al encontrarnos solos y holgados os creéis inmortales. ¡Qué error! Los Gobiernos que no tienen herederos legítimos mueren también, pero mueren antes y mueren mal, porque entregan al morir su alma al diablo y su herencia á la revolución, heredera universal de todos los Poderes intestados. (*Diario* [1881] 50)

As might be expected, the Conservatives' response to León y Castillo's diatribe was quick and harsh. On January 11, Lasala, Cánovas's Ministro de Fomento, launched a long harangue in which he belittled and ridiculed the Liberals as "los desheredados del poder." Whereas, Lasala's preamble contains five pointed references to "desheredamientos" and

"dsheredados," his central section has no less than fifteen:

Estos *dsheredamientos* del poder, decía el señor León y Castillo, traen grandes males; por ellos sobrevienen las catástrofes; y yo precisamente, después de negar que haya *dsheredamiento* ninguno, niego el hecho de que las revoluciones no las hagan en España más que los *dsheredados* del poder. No tratemos de las revoluciones en general, ni hablemos de otros cataclismos que la Europa ha presenciado; hablamos de los cataclismos y revoluciones españolas. ¿Quiénes las han hecho? ¿Eran, por ventura, *dsheredados* del poder en 1840 quienes recogían el gobierno en esa misma fecha?

[...]

Y si seguimos recorriendo la historia contemporánea, veremos que desde 1843 en adelante, cuando triunfa una revolución, es precisamente (y ahora podemos decirlo, porque estamos haciendo historia y nada más que historia), es precisamente porque toman parte en ella, no los *dsheredados* del poder solamente, sino aquellos que han estado ejerciéndolo durante algunos años. De esto resulta que nunca los *dsheredados* del poder son los que han hecho las revoluciones, sino que las han hecho los que han estado en el poder, los que le han ejercido en aquel período histórico.

[...]

Y decía yo que jamás los *dsheredados* del poder han triunfado en ninguna situación; pero sostengo que los peligros no vienen de esos *dsheredamientos*. Después de 1856, los *dsheredados* del Poder hicieron nuevas tentativas, pero fueron también infructuosas y no prosperaron; y solamente el día en que tomaron parte elementos que habían estado al frente del poder (y no me toca emitir sobre esto juicio ninguno, porque sin duda ellos creyeron en su conciencia que debían ponerse al lado de los *dsheredados* del poder), aquel día, y solo aquel día, los *dsheredados* durante catorce años llegaron á triunfar. Por consiguiente, si de peligros se trata (y no quiero sacar de esto ninguna teoría, no hago más que oponer hechos á hechos), el peligro no ha venido jamás de los *dsheredados* del poder. Claro está que cuando así me expreso, lo hago tomando las mismas frases del Sr. León y Castillo; claro está que tomo su propia idea y sus propios calificativos, y llamo *dsheredados* á los que á S.S. le place llamar *dsheredados*: no porque yo esté en el caso de conceder que sean *dsheredados*; antes al contrario, lo niego. (*Diario* [1881] 71; my emphasis)

Approximately one week after Cánovas's own Ministro de Fomento had popularized the term "dsheredadado" by using it or a variant in this well-publicized exchange in the Sala de Diputados, the title of Galdós's forthcoming novel, *La dsheredada*, appears in Ortega y Munilla's letter.⁵ If, then, as the circumstances suggest, Galdós was inspired by Lasala's lexicon, what kind of political message did he hope to convey with his choice of titles?

On the one hand, it appears unlikely that the novelist wanted to compare Isidora—the title is clearly an epithet for the protagonist—with Sagasta and the Liberals' struggle for power in 1881. Although Rufete and Sagasta had both been promised power and both believed fervently in their right to a respected position in the socio-political hierarchy, the analogy fails when one recalls that Isidora's claim to privilege is ultimately based on falsified documents. On the other hand, by mid-January, 1881, virtually all of Spain could sense that the Cánovas government was on the brink of collapse (Beck 120-27; Francos Rodríguez 140-72; *Diario*

[1881]: 2794). A different political faction was about to become “los desheredados del poder.” And, even more to the point, the trajectory of Cánovas’s fall will parallel that of Isidora in several significant ways. The right-wing politician, the same as Rufete, is accused of budgetary mismanagement, falsification of documents (“subvenciones”), general fraud, and scandal (Schnepf “History into Fiction” and “The Significance”). Furthermore, Isidora shares her bed with three characters—Melchor Relimpio, Sánchez Botín, and Gaitica—that previous criticism has linked to major scandals in the Cánovas government in 1880-1881 (Schnepf “The Significance” and “History”). It appears, therefore, that the title of the novel is laden with political overtones that almost certainly struck a chord in Galdós’s contemporary readers.

In one respect, it is perhaps not surprising that Galdós should have selected such a charged and recognizable title: serial writers frequently attempted to establish common ground with their readers in order to increase a sense of familiarity and to boost the sale of subscriptions (Tillotson 40-43; Iser 11-12; Ross 37-40). Yet, *La desheredada* was the very conscious beginning of a new style of novel-writing by Galdós, the first of a series of novels that were later to be grouped under the title of “novelas de la serie contemporánea” (Cossío 257). The contemporaneous political associations of the title are, consequently, an appropriate indication of this new direction in his œuvre.

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NOTES

¹ Several other respected critics—Stephen Gilman, Jo Labanyi, Antonio Regalado García, and Rubén Benítez—have researched the significance of Galdós’s title. Each offers plausible explanations of the title that are relevant to the present essay. Labanyi, Regalado García, and Benítez, for example, identify a political element of one form or another. This essay will demonstrate, however, that there is reason to question Gilman’s contention that the title is “intentionally misleading” (111).

² Ortega’s announcement, without a title, reads as follows: “También prepara un nuevo libro Pérez Galdós. Pero no aparecerá esta año, sinó el año 1881. Constará de dos tomos. Parece que Galdós va á pintar en su obra ese sedimento social producido por la ignorancia y la superstición. Ya ha pintado á las descreídas y á las fanáticas. Ahora va á pintar las inteligencias oscuras, donde el mal chispea esos cerebros que se iluminan en la taberna con las llamas azules del alcohol y en las cuales fermenta el espíritu de las rebeliones sociales. ¡Gran obra digna de Galdós por cierto! ¿Quién podrá llevarla á cabo si él no lo hace?”

³ Given the relationship between Ortega and Galdós, it is logical to assume that the former would be the one to reveal the title of Galdós’s new novel and that he would do so in *Los Lunes de El Imparcial*. In the 15 editions of Ortega’s literary section published between October 4, 1880 (just after the allusion to Galdós’s new but still untitled work) and January 10, 1881 (just before the letter referring to *La desheredada*) there is no reference to *La desheredada*. This information suggests that Galdós did not settle on a title until around the middle of January, 1881 and that Ortega was the first to learn of Galdós’s choice. The first reference to the title in *Los Lunes de El Imparcial* came on March 14, 1881: “Pérez Galdós ha empezado a publicar en cuadernos semanales *La desheredada*, una novela que se anuncia y espera hace tiempo. El principio de este libro es la pintura de un manicomio, la casa de Orates de Leganés. ¡Horrible cuadro,

lleno de verdad y grandiosa elocuencia! Galdós inaugura una nueva fase de su talento. Una cruda realidad resalta en estas páginas. *La desheredada* tendrá una herencia de gloria.” For comments on the relationship between Ortega and Galdós, see Schmidt (108-10) and Schnepf (“A Note on Galdós”). Ignacio-Javier López (“Ortega Munilla,” “En torno”) has researched the pre-publication history of *La desheredada*. He does not mention any reference to the title before January 16, 1881.

⁴ It is important to remember that *La desheredada* was, as Geoffrey Ribbons has so clearly demonstrated, published as a “novela por suscripción.” Even though Part I of the novel carries the date January 1881, the initial “cuadernos semanales” did not reach subscribers until the second week of March, 1881 (Ribbons 72).

⁵ It should be noted that the congressional records—extracts or in their entirety—were published daily in several Madrid newspapers. Furthermore, Galdós, a future Sagasta deputy, was an avid reader of the *Diario de las Sesiones de Cortes* (Schnepf “The Significance”).

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