

The Camp and the Dandy: Class, Sexuality, and Desire in Gil de Biedma's Diaries

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Abstract. This paper analyses how homosexual desire is represented in Jaime Gil de Biedma's *Diarios 1956–1985*, the complete edition of his personal diaries, by exploring its connections to cultural, historical, and social notions about homosexuality in Spain. Gil de Biedma (1929–1990) was an influential Spanish poet whose diaries represent an example of the finest autobiographical literature. This is a rare case of a Spanish author who provides a complex picture of what it was to be a gay intellectual in Spain during Francoism through life-writing. By close reading a selection of fragments of the author's diaries, this study exposes the connections between class, sexuality, and desire in the author's autobiographical writing. This paper claims that in the nearly thirty years that his diaries span, Gil de Biedma's strategies of representation of his sexuality undergo several changes, from a fascination with the lower classes to an ironic, camp detachment with life. These shifts of the object of desire are part of trends within the male, homosexual community in Spain throughout the twentieth century. I argue that although those strategies of representation were key for gay individuals to build their identity in Spain at the time, the freedom to change and experiment is linked to the author's class privilege. This study shows that Gil de Biedma's position in society allowed him to have the time to explore and perform different models of sexual resistance in his life and literary works.

Jaime Gil de Biedma is one of Spain's most acclaimed poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Although his literary production was brief — he stopped writing poetry in 1964, having decided he no longer had anything worth saying — Gil de Biedma was widely respected by the younger literary generations at the time. The Spanish literary magazine *Litoral* published a full number in homage to Gil de Biedma in 1985, including pieces by several reputed writers and poets, 'friends and travel companions'.¹ They rallied around the Barcelonan author to provide a new edition of his best poetry and an analysis of his lyrical creation. The focus on Gil de Biedma's lyrical work has been common

¹ Luis García Montero, Antonio Jiménez Millán and Álvaro Salvador, 'Aviso para lectores de Jaime Gil de Biedma', *Litoral*, 163–65 (1985–86), 6–7 (p. 7).

in Hispanic studies — partly because Gil de Biedma himself was not very comfortable using labels to (de)scribe his own desires. This lyrical approach, still seen in contemporary authors such as Payeras Grau,² is key to exploring the author's main literary themes, the passing of time and sexual ambiguity, both of which play an important role in his life-writing. This paper complicates the relevance of Gil de Biedma's poetical work by exploring the importance of the author's diary craft through a particular focus on sections referring to sexuality and desire. This research analyses how homosexual desire is represented in his *Diario del artista en 1956* and explores its connections to cultural, historical, and social notions about homosexuality in Spain.

Homosentimentality and Masculinity

Gil de Biedma worked on his diaries throughout his life in an attempt to train his writing craft and to 'impose moral categories unto himself'.³ This notion of writing as an ethical exercise unfolds in the diaries in several different and often overlapping ways. References are made to his relationship with his family (at times strained, particularly with respect to his parents), to his career, and to his sexuality, the last of which plays a main role in the diaries. To analyse the author's exploration of sexuality in his youth during his sojourn in Manila and his subsequent return to Spain, it is first necessary to clarify and interconnect both notions of sexuality and gender. R.W. Connell argues that gender is an agent by which different social practices are arranged.⁴ Gender is an internally complex process and structure, with several connections to other areas of the self.⁵ Richmond Ellis has argued that Gil de Biedma explores his sexuality somewhat radically in the writing of his diaries, occupying what might be construed as a progressive position. The author's view on gender, however, remains traditional. Gil de Biedma considered himself a 'homosentimental' person,⁶ seemingly giving importance to affection over sexual attraction. Given this very particular blend of affection, sex, and his own masculine self, the author demonstrates Connell's postulate that masculinity is not just a homogeneous concept that can be applied equally to any man.⁷ Instead, it is flexible, adaptable, and malleable.

According to Connell, masculinities 'come into existence as people act, t]hey are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given

² María Payeras Grau, "La vida que yo viví en sus versos": Los poetas de "la otra sentimentalidad" en diálogo con Jaime Gil de Biedma', *Olivar (La Plata)*, 31, 20 (2020), e075-e075 <<https://doi.org/10.24215/18524478e075>>.

³ Jaime Gil de Biedma and Andreu Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985* (Barcelona: Penguin Random House, 2017), p. 153.

⁴ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*.

⁶ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 159.

⁷ R. W. Connell, *Men and the boys* (Sidney: Polity Press, 2000), p. 12.

social setting', showing the strong link between socioeconomic background and gender.⁸ Gil de Biedma's resources and strategies were of course characteristic of any bourgeois Spanish man of his era. He went to a good university to read law, often the preferred first choice for men at the time, and attempted to pursue a diplomatic career, albeit unsuccessfully. Although his education was excellent, befitting his family's social background, he did not develop a love for literature until the end of his teens. Soon after he finished his higher education, he was offered an executive position in the *Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas* (General Company of Tobacco of the Philippines), the familial enterprise, in a classic example of paternal nepotism. To use contemporary terms, Gil de Biedma was imbued in upper-class, male privilege from the moment he was born. Indeed, with the exception of his sexuality, he was a man who generally behaved in line with the societal expectations of his time. He had some sexual encounters with women in his adult life, for instance during his brief stay in Hong Kong,⁹ and in his youth, as he explains in his correspondence.¹⁰ It might be considered that Gil de Biedma's sexuality changed the course of his otherwise plain, bourgeois life. He realized in his youth that women could not provide the 'mood' that he would look for in a partner,¹¹ as he considered himself homosentimental. In fact, he made it all sound like a conscious choice, to the extent of asserting: 'decidí en toda deliberación pasarme al bando homosexual.'¹² Both concepts — mood and deliberation — must be contextualized within the era that Gil de Biedma lived in and his literary influences, which had a strong impact on his self-understanding.

Diary of a Spanish Dandy

In his book *De Sodoma a Chueca*, Alberto Mira deconstructs the idea of a univocal gay sexuality in Spanish culture, with the principal objective of analysing the cultural discourse around homosexuality in Spain's recent history. Discourse is comprised of both representation and expression, which are key to the analysis of Gil de Biedma's identity in this paper. Rejecting any essentialist claims, Mira identifies three 'models of resistance' in Spanish homosexual culture.¹³ These models are related both to the way in which homosexuals give sense to their lives and to three parallel homophobic models of representation. They are *malditista* (decadentist, oriented towards the marginal side of society), homophile (aiming towards a normalization of homosexuality), and camp (an

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, p. 152.

¹⁰ Jaime Gil de Biedma and Andreu Jaume, *El argumento de la obra. Correspondencia* (Barcelona: Lumen, 2010).

¹¹ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 152.

¹² Ibid., p. 159. 'I deliberately decided to swap to the homosexual side'.

¹³ Alberto Mira, *De Sodoma a Chueca: Una historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España en el siglo XX* (Barcelona: Egales, 2004), p. 27.

ironic perspective that questions the importance of moral imperatives and social structures). In the life and work of Gil de Biedma it is possible to find a mixture of those three perspectives, with a tendency for camp over the other two, especially in his maturity. The author's understanding of his sexuality is modulated by his adherence or refusal of these three general trends. Social class plays an important role here: these models of resistance were likely to take place in a certain social sphere, the bourgeoisie, which would have been the one with the capacity to create such artistic resistance. Social commitment is one of the characteristics of the author's literary generation, the *Generación del 50* (also called the School of Barcelona). This stems from 'an ability to oppose the class they belong to by birth'.¹⁴ The aforementioned models are therefore helpful in understanding the way that cultural and social influences interact with one another. As such, this research will apply these models to Gil de Biedma's sexual identity.

As aforementioned, Gil de Biedma's period in Manila mainly involved an active exploration of his sexuality. His style of youth is sexually explicit and clear. The author does not employ his characteristic poetical ambiguity here: the first chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956* is a celebration of the author's excesses during his youth.¹⁵ Gil de Biedma starts his diary the night before his first trip to Manila in January 1956, narrating his journey. On the first night, he already shows an inclination for a decadent lifestyle: 'Todavía de resaca. Los amigos se dan el gusto malévolo de contarme lo que hice y dije durante los prolongados lapsos de tiempo de los que no guardo recuerdo. Todos coinciden en que disparaté de lo lindo'.¹⁶

Here Gil de Biedma sets the tone for his diary: he wants to explore a side of his life outside of bourgeois conventions. This decision falls in line with the author's political beliefs and with those of his generation. The author's hedonism and penchant for excess will be a recurrent theme, not only in this diary, but throughout his life. Such a life of pleasure is, furthermore, at odds with his upper-class background and his job — hence why it was so appealing. For instance, Gil de Biedma finds a certain poetic quality in the darker, dirtier corners of the city: 'lo delicioso es que el cubo mediado con orines, el olor a zotal y el tapete pegajoso de la mesa en la cantina participan de esa calidad paradisíaca del paisaje'.¹⁷ In his younger years, Gil de Biedma exhibits a willingness to explore the underside of society, finding beauty in the contrast to his bourgeois background; it is Gil de Biedma's personal rebellion against his social milieu. The author's literary influences at the time, mainly French

¹⁴ Carme Riera, *La Escuela de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1988), p. 255.

¹⁵ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *El argumento de la obra*, p. 445.

¹⁶ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 71. 'Still hungover. My friends take the evil pleasure of telling me what I did and said during the long periods of time of which I keep no memory. Everybody agrees that I talked plenty of nonsense.'

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73. '[W]hat is delightful is that the bucket full of urine, the smell of disinfectant and the sticky tablecloth on the canteen's table are all part of the paradise-like quality of the landscape.'

symbolist poets such as Baudelaire (whom he quotes at the beginning of his first diary), are a sign of his tendency for romanticism. Although Gil de Biedma's style was strongly influenced by English literature, his chosen themes (poverty, brothels, the exotic) are connected to Spanish romanticism. Fitting with the model Mira calls 'malditista', we can see 'an element of romantic rebellion' in the themes of Gil de Biedma's diary.¹⁸

For a gay person, to be *maldito* or *malditista* implies a refusal to 'wash the sin' of homosexuality.¹⁹ The main purpose of the *maldito* is to live in the fringes of society, to avoid being integrated in bourgeois society (although, paradoxically, Gil de Biedma was very well integrated into this social sphere), which itself rejects the idea of homosexuality. The objective is to reject the current values and to experiment with the underside of society: drugs, sex, and crime. This may be coupled, as in the case of Jaime Gil de Biedma, with a dandy attitude. Dandyism is an outlook that revolves around 'the development of individualism'.²⁰ The focus is on image and appearance, on the masks that individuals show the world. This is combined with a feeling of superiority and a *carpe diem* approach to life. The concept of dandyism, popularized by Oscar Wilde, is connected to social class — it seems as if it is a privilege of the upper-classes to be able to become a dandy.²¹

Gil de Biedma's fascination with the marginal side of society is explored in depth in 'Las islas de Circe', the first chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956*. Here the author expresses a candid enthusiasm, never exempt of irony. He struggled with these marginal experiences and used the diary to express his frustration: 'me he quitado el mal sabor de boca'.²² There is an ambivalence, a certain detachment that will always influence Gil de Biedma's *malditismo* — this will become more evident in later diaries, where his diaristic writing will evolve towards other ways of conceptualizing homosexuality. The author is not usually considered *maldito* in literary circles. Indeed, he even admits not being into *malditismo*, when referring to a tryst he and his friend Juan Goytisolo had with a shoe shiner in Barcelona.²³ Furthermore, earlier in his diaries and in reference to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Gil de Biedma criticizes the lack of irony and excess of truculence in the book — in opposition to that *malditista* pose, Gil de Biedma opts for an ironic detachment, as shall be explored below.²⁴

However, despite his dislike for the contrived pose of the *maldito*, the author describes similar experiences in his first diary. For instance, one of the main encounters with the social underside takes place in a brothel in Manila, at the beginning of the author's stay. Gil de Biedma starts by reflecting on the concept

¹⁸ Mira, p. 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²² Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 98. 'I got rid of the bad taste in my mouth.'

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

of temptation, after which a taxi driver takes him to a sordid brothel full of boys and girls. He spends no more than five minutes there, since the boy he was given was but ‘un pobre grumete castigado a remar’.²⁵ This is likely the author’s attempt at subjectivizing the abhorrent scene in front of his eyes. He frames it in relation to a literary and camp trope that could fit with his intellectual identity. In the fragment, Gil de Biedma reminisces about Spanish male prostitutes, who he seems to think give better value for money. The author finds the experience very disturbing, and rightly so: he did not agree with sleeping with someone underage.²⁶ This passage, which has received a lot of media attention in recent times,²⁷ is considered one of the darkest ones in the life of Gil de Biedma, because of the events that took place, which are indeed problematic. Although execrable in any case, it would be unfair to overlook how much the author is at pains to prove that he disapproved of relationships with underage people: ‘[L]os chiquillos no me gustan. A cada cual, lo suyo: el colegial con el colegial, el adolescente con su amigo íntimo, [...] y el hombre joven con el hombre joven’.²⁸

Even if controversial, I would like to suggest that this passage is key to understanding Gil de Biedma’s model of homosexual desire. His *malditismo* is apparent in the topic of choice, in the way he explores these early, marginal experiences. He does not fully engage with them, detaching himself and being critical about them. However, there is still a part of him who would happily go for a Spanish prostitute. Yes, his character reflects a certain marginality, but one that is coupled with a sense of morality: no underage, forced children. Gil de Biedma’s style in this excerpt can be understood both in the realm of his experimentation, but also in the use of the diaries as a tool to impose certain moral standards upon himself.²⁹ The author uses the diaries to erase things from his mind.³⁰ The process of recording and narrating his sexual experiences can be interpreted as a way of dealing with both the positive and negative sides of those encounters, finding ways to do what is morally correct. Gil de Biedma’s interest in morality (a rather bourgeois concept) clashes with this model of *malditismo*, which is, at least superficially, an antibourgeois attitude, hence why in his middle age he is quick to reject that fascination for the marginal, turning instead to a more ironic, yet deeper and more sophisticated, approach to the gay, the colonized, the Other.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 97. ‘[A] poor shipboy, punished to row’.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

²⁷ Manuel Morales, ‘García Montero defiende la inclusión del legado de Gil de Biedma en el Cervantes’, *El País*, 15 January 2021 < <https://elpais.com/cultura/2021-01-15/garcia-montero-defiende-la-inclusion-del-legado-de-gil-de-biedma-en-el-cervantes.html> > [accessed 15 June 2021]

²⁸ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 98. ‘I don’t like little boys. To each, their own: the schoolboy with the schoolboy, the teenager with his intimate friend, [...] and the young man with the young man.’

²⁹ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 110.

The content spanning the second chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956* to the end of the diary suggests a decrease in sexual interest on the author's part. This stems mainly from his return from the Philippines to Spain and his subsequent tuberculosis. This change of interests and outlook was already taking place in Manila. It was also influenced by his move back to Spain; since the process of migration often triggers changes in the perception of gender and masculinity, as González-Allende posits in his study on migration and masculinity.³¹ The aforementioned process has a wide-ranging impact that goes beyond the scope of this paper, but which opens up very interesting lines of research. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to explore the change from that young *malditismo* in the Philippines (though full of doubts and irony) to the mature swing between respectability and camp in Gil de Biedma's diaries.

Gil de Biedma never promoted a passionate defence of homosexuality. References to homosexuality, both in his diaries and interviews, are clear and straightforward, yet they rarely involve an argument for or against it. Gil de Biedma shows a somewhat arrogant attitude whereby he chooses to enjoy his sexuality in whichever way he wants, without really explaining why, in line with his dandy quality. This is especially evident in his younger years. His first letter to Carlos Barral, the famous editor and lifelong friend of Gil de Biedma, starts with the following lines: '¿Sabes que ya casi deseo empicorotarme nuevamente? *Quand je n'aime rien, je ne suis rien*'.³² *Empicorotarme* is an Asturian verb, the Spanish version would be *empingorotarme*, meaning to rise up — a connection between an erection and love (what Gil de Biedma would describe as an instance of Aphrodite Pandemos, the author's take on the Greek tradition of sexual, romantic love). In another letter to Carlos Barral, Gil de Biedma mentions a conversation between José Agustín Goytisolo and Alberto Oliart, a writer friend of Jaime Gil de Biedma, about the author's sexuality. This does not seem to concern the author, although he expects a more judgemental reaction from Alberto Oliart, who just answered to the effect of 'do as you wish, just be careful'.³³ Such a natural way of presenting his sexuality is common in Gil de Biedma's diaries, although this happy-go-lucky attitude will give way, in the author's elderly years, to the opposite: a fear of being outed, in modern parlance.³⁴ In his youth, however, there is no clear reference to any type of struggle or discrimination, although there is no doubt this was pervasive in the 1950s Spanish society. It is possible to glean the impact of social pressure when we analyse Gil de Biedma's attitudes a little closer; indeed, it becomes apparent that the author does think very carefully about the ways he presents himself to society. His relationship with his parents is a good example of this

³¹ Iker González-Allende, *Hombres en movimiento* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2018), p. 2.

³² Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *El argumento de la obra*, p. 69. 'Do you know I almost wish to score again? When I don't love anything, I am nothing.'

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

social pressure. The references to his mother and father are scarce, but they do come up every so often. Generally, they are negative: they seem to exert a suffocating influence on Biedma. In the third chapter of *Diario del artista en 1956*, Gil de Biedma narrates an argument with his parents about a divergence of ideas about the Compañía de Tabacos. Gil de Biedma's mother criticizes his 'camaleonismo', his 'novelería'.³⁵ The author explains that such chameleon-like adaptability is one of his most valued poetic qualities: the ability to absorb the surrounding culture. He displayed this in Oxford and in Manila. His parents dislike it: a subtle reference to a cosmopolitan sensitivity that is at odds with the respectability their son ought to display. Gil de Biedma points here to a fear of what they might be told — again a possible reference to the author's secret sexuality. This illustrates that, even though the author adopts an arrogant, dandy attitude, he is more influenced by his social milieu than he would like; this has an unfortunate impact on his mental health. For example, it is around that time that Gil de Biedma starts to realize that he has a drinking problem. This happened after he crashed his father's car against another vehicle, when he was taking a lover home.³⁶ Overall, the social pressure described here does not prompt the author to a defence of homosexuality, following Mira's homophile model, but rather to both a detachment and a criticism of social rules (following the camp model) and an attempt at being respectable and keeping an ambiguous appearance: a modern, twentieth century take on the dandy.

Campying the Dandy

Gil de Biedma provides an excellent definition of camp, a concept in which he was very interested. Camp has no straight translation into Spanish: *pluma* (literal translation: feather) might work occasionally, and Gil de Biedma uses it interchangeably on occasion. In Spanish, *pluma* is more related to physical effeminacy (acting and looking like the stereotypical feminine gender) and it lacks the reference to a certain gay culture the English has. For the author the idea of camp is wider than just the more physical idea of *pluma*. In 1978, Bruce Swansey and José Ramón Enríquez interviewed Gil de Biedma about the homosexual sensitivity of the Generación del 27.³⁷ Nowhere in the interview does Gil de Biedma discuss his own experience; instead, he uses a full range of literary references, from Goethe to Lorca, from Susan Sontag to Christopher Isherwood, to explain the multiple facets of camp in Spanish literature. For Gil de Biedma, camp is 'the author's deliberate treatment of referential and thematic elements in his work [...] as mere formal categories [...] the author

³⁵ Gil de Biedma and Jaume, *Diarios: 1956–1985*, p. 219. 'chameleon-like attitude', 'fickle, imaginative attitude'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

³⁷ Javier Pérez Escohotado, *Jaime Gil de Biedma. Conversaciones* (Barcelona: Austral, 2015), p. 99.

ironically partakes of'.³⁸ Gil de Biedma clearly distinguishes camp from homosexuality: although related, they do not always appear together, even though in the post-Stonewall era this became a common occurrence, according to Mira.³⁹ The main point of camp for Gil de Biedma is the use of language and irony as a code that only those who know it (who understand it, *entender* being a Spanish shibboleth to ask if someone is gay) would understand. Gil de Biedma differentiates between camp and *pluma* — camp is a more general aesthetic whilst *pluma* would be 'a deliberate projection, an ironic stylization of the queer'.⁴⁰ The *pluma*, according to Gil de Biedma, is a way of communicating in the gay world, which involves a varied mix of people from different backgrounds with little in common but their sexual preference. *Pluma* is also loaded with provocation; it defies the straight world, it is but 'a refined vendetta against all heterosexuals'.⁴¹ Gil de Biedma shows his camp in this conversation: his literary references are a sign to the initiated, i.e. to other gay people, yet he does not put it into words. Gil de Biedma's references appear to operate on two levels, the open and the covert. One level reflects the openly social, where he might broach these issues ambiguously, thus avoiding any repercussions in his social, familial and work milieus. Secondly, there is the (supposedly) hidden gay level, which is by contrast sexually daring and open. The camp dandy quality of the author is what brings those two worlds together: his detachment and irony help to maintain his social position, whilst delivering a clear gay message to those acquainted with the conventions of camp. The question now arises: how is this camp quality reflected in Gil de Biedma's diaries? Are Gil de Biedma's camp characteristics a result of his class privilege, a message to his own class?

The three models analysed above, *malditista*, homophile and camp, constitute the social context for Gil de Biedma's sexuality. They provide the theoretical basis to understand the author's strategies of acceptance of his sexuality within his social context. The camp approach appears to be overarching in the author's life and work, after a brief *malditista* period during his younger years. These three models of resistance are part of a wider gender and class picture, which are interrelated. Gil de Biedma's upper-class masculinity is based on his economic privilege, allowing the author to have the time to create, explore and perform those models of resistance in his life and literature. Understanding the author's privileged background provides nuance to his position about his own sexuality in his poetry and diaries. Jaime Gil de Biedma's diaries present a chameleonic, multifaceted approach to the tension-ridden performance of masculine gender and queer desire in the Spanish intellectual bourgeoisie of the late 1950s.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 100–01.

³⁹ Mira, p. 149.

⁴⁰ Pérez Escohotado, p. 105.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 105.