

FEMININE VOICE AND SPACE IN EARLY MODERN IBERIAN CONVENT
THEATER

By

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To Logan, who always came first,
and to Juan Carlos, who was always there.

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INTRODUCTION

“A whole history remains to be written of spaces.”
Michel Foucault

During the early modern period in both Spain and Portugal, convents dotted the peninsula, indicative of the fact that “the monastic experience . . . was an integral part of the rich and diverse fabric of Catholic life” (van Whye 1). Unfortunately, many of these convents have not survived and their records have vanished along with them. Although there may be no way to know the exact number of convents on the Iberian Peninsula during the Golden Age or how many women inhabited them, evidence still remains of a rich artistic and literary life that flourished *intramuros*. We know that nuns painted, wove tapestries, cooked, sang, and wrote literature. Autobiographical accounts of nuns such as Santa Teresa de Jesús, known as *vidas*, have captured the attention of many scholars, perhaps due to the fascinating mystic tradition manifest in those texts. The vibrant theatrical tradition of the convent, however, has largely gone unnoticed. As Lisa Vollendorf argues, “This lack of attention can be attributed to the problem of access to texts and to the tendency among those of us trained as secular humanists to shy away from religious topics” (95). Fortunately, recent efforts have promoted a new awareness of convent plays, although it seems safe to say that the great majority of Golden Age scholars have little or no interest in authors such as Sor Maria do Ceo and Sor Marcela de San Félix. Thankfully, the new surge in scholarship in this area has produced new editions of many of these texts, thereby making them available to a wider public and

encouraging their study. Nevertheless, academic criticism of these works has largely been limited to introductions and footnotes.

Some critics do not hesitate to disparage this type of theater. In his article about women dramatists, Emilio Palacios Fernández discusses female playwrights such as Joanna Theodora de Souza and Maria do Ceo. Although he admits that the publication and presentation of their works constitutes a “fenómeno cultural,” he pointedly insists that “su producción dramática no está a la misma altura que la del varón (más amplia y diversa)” (131). Palacios Fernández seems to take note of these women only in order to prove them lacking by comparison. Notwithstanding this example, criticism of this nature is the exception rather than the rule. In fact, the lack of attention that convent theater receives is due mostly to sins of omission, rather than commission. As a case in point, convent theater is largely absent from many theater anthologies and histories. For example, Ignacio Arellano’s *Historia del teatro español del siglo XVII* does not make mention of the convent theater tradition or any of the known peninsular nun playwrights. It does, however, discuss theater used for pedagogical purposes in Jesuit schools, the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and *autos sacramentales*. Convent theater shares many points of contact with each of these, and yet has no place in this work. It is interesting to note that Arellano places Sor Juana, along with Ana Caro, in a section titled “Dramaturgos *menores* del ciclo de Calderón” (579; my emphasis), and that he makes no mention whatsoever of María de Zayas.

Henryk Ziomek commits a similar omission in his less extensive study, *A History of Spanish Golden Age Drama*. Unlike Arellano’s study, Ziomek’s book has a narrower scope and he focuses mainly on the *comedia*, although he does write about religious

drama in his introductory chapter, including the genre of *autos sacramentales*. Nun playwrights, however, do not make an appearance in his work. Notwithstanding, this is not the only omission of female authors in Ziomek's history, since Ana Caro is conspicuously absent, and he refers to María de Zayas only in conjunction with the playwright Juan de la Hoz y Mota, who wrote a *comedia* based on one of her *novelas ejemplares*. Ziomek does not reference Zayas's *comedia*, *La traición en la amistad*. Lázaro Ladero Sánchez's ambitious work, titled *El siglo de oro español y sus contemporáneos*, does not limit itself to early modern literature from Spain, but rather includes texts and authors from other European countries, as well, such as Portugal, Holland, Italy, and France, to name just a few. It even discusses authors and works from the Americas and the Far East. Although it does contain a section on religious literature in Spain, it limits itself to the inclusion of Teresa de Jesús and Juan de la Cruz. With regard to secular women playwrights, Ladero Sánchez includes María de Zayas, but not Ana Caro. To be perfectly fair, the scope of these histories is very broad, and by nature must make certain exclusions. I do find, however, that the inclusion or exclusion of female playwrights, specifically Ana Caro and María de Zayas, is a telling litmus test that reveals the author's sensibilities. If critics such as Arellano, Ziomek, and Ladero Sánchez do not mention Caro and Zayas in their studies, it is highly unlikely that they would include 'lesser' women writers, such as Sor Violante do Ceo or Sor Francisca de Santa Teresa. Although early modern convent theater was a widespread phenomenon, it traditionally has not enjoyed a place in literary history, unlike the highly popular and lucrative commercial theater of the *Siglo de Oro*.

On the other hand, other similar studies make more of a concerted effort to include female playwrights, including those who wrote convent theater. One such study is the voluminous and ambitious *Historia del teatro español*, edited by Fernando Doménech Rico, which contains a section titled “El teatro conventual” (1254). This section, included in the chapter “El teatro escrito por mujeres” (1243), makes mention of Sor María de San Alberto, Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento, Sor Marcela de San Félix, and Sor Francisca de Santa Teresa. *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* includes a chapter by Alison Weber titled “Religious Literature in Early Modern Spain,” in which she makes note of Sor Marcela. The majority of the chapter, however, is devoted to those religious men and women who wrote prose rather than drama. On the Portuguese side, Domingo Garcia Peres’s heftily titled *Catálogo razonado biográfico y bibliográfico de los autores portugueses que escribieron en castellano* includes Sor Violante with an interesting editorial note. The author points out that “Sus obras que no obtuvieron sino loores de sus contemporáneos, están hoy olvidadas, si no desconocidas; si entónces hubo exageración, hoy hay injusticia notoria” (107). The much more recent *História e Antologia da Literatura Portuguesa Século XVII* includes an article on Sor Violante’s poetry by Margarida Vieira Mendes, as well as selected texts from *Rimas Várias* and *Parnaso Lusitano*. Neither Garcia Peres’s text nor *História e Antologia* makes mention of the Portuguese nun playwrights Sor Maria do Ceo and Dona Joanna Theodora de Souza.

Admittedly, access to dramatic texts written by nuns is often difficult or even restricted. A small group of female scholars has dedicated themselves to the recovery of convent drama, and their efforts have begun to make these plays available to a wider audience while calling attention to the general lack of scholarship in this area. Electa

Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers pioneered this field, beginning with the publication of the complete works of Sor Marcela de San Félix in 1988. Interestingly, the title of their anthology includes the appellation “hija de Lope de Vega.” Although several critics have employed this tactic of presenting Sor Marcela in conjunction with her father, it is important to note that this practice has the contradictory effect of both authorizing her as a talented writer by connecting her to a larger literary tradition, and undermining this authorization by suggesting that her work cannot stand on its own. Presenting Sor Marcela in juxtaposition with Lope de Vega is simultaneously necessary and patronizing. Soon after this publication, Arenal teamed up with Stacey Schlau to publish their seminal study on convent writing, *Untold Sisters*, which includes both criticism and texts. Later, other scholars, such as Susan Smith, edited and published long forgotten works by Sor Maria do Ceo, Sor Violante do Ceo, Sor Francisca de Santa Teresa, and Sor María de San Alberto. Literary criticism of their texts, however, has been scarce.

I believe this lack of criticism is due, in large part, to the difficulty of accessing some of these texts, even today. For example, Ana Hatherly translated Sor Maria do Ceo’s collection of five *autos*, *O triunfo do Rosário*, from the original Spanish into Portuguese, and this edition is currently the only version available of those plays. Sor Maria’s play *Clavel, y Rosa*¹ and the three *autos* she penned in honor of the Spanish saint San Alejo exist only as manuscripts. Fortunately, Valerie Hegstrom is currently working on an edition of all of Sor Maria’s extant works, thereby ensuring that scholars will have greater access to her literature than ever before. In a similar manner, Sor Violante’s *villancicos* appear only in the collection titled *Parnaso Lusitano*, published posthumously

¹ Although modern Spanish does not accept the use of a comma before the conjunction *y*, here I utilize the same formatting, spelling and punctuation as found in the original texts. Other play names, such as *Perla, y Rosa*, follow suit.

in 1733, and in my 2007 master's thesis, thereby making access to them extremely difficult. I hope that this dissertation will encourage both scholarship as well as archival research that could make these texts more easily accessible to a wider audience. Perhaps calling more attention to these texts could even encourage the recovery of their performance tradition by allowing both actors and directors to discover and appreciate their unique form and style.

As scholars of convent drama have noted, one must take into account the fact that nuns penned these plays against the backdrop of the convent, and that monastic life influenced their production. For example, Arenal and Sabat de Rivers explicate that entering the convent allowed Sor Marcela to “reclamar el derecho que tenía al uso de la palabra escrita” (25), while Arenal and Schlau note the importance of the fact that the convent afforded exceptional opportunities for the nuns to develop feelings of solidarity with other women. Clearly, the environment of the convent allowed women to produce literature that reflected the unique experiences and relationships they found only *intramuros*. I propose that although scholars of convent theater certainly understand and value the import and impact of life in the cloister on the nuns and their drama, the application of the concept of space can lead to interesting insights and new avenues of discussion in this field. As we know from important feminist texts, such as Christine Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, women have historically been “exposed like a field without a hedge” (Pizan 124) and “under the rule of a patriarchy” (Woolf 33). In order to combat this predicament, both authors suggest a spatial solution.

Pizan envisions a protected gendered city, which “will never be destroyed, nor will it fall” (125), in which women will be free of the oppressive influence of the patriarchy. The medieval writer skillfully describes the creation of this glorious city designed by and for women, and explains that the virtues Reason, Justice, and Rectitude, who appear in the text as female embodiments, would reign supreme there. In Pizan’s imaginings, Reason helps to lay the foundations of the city and dig a protective trench around it. She explains that she and the other virtues wish for Pizan “to lay the strong foundation and to raise the wide walls around, high and thick, with huge towers and strong bastions with moats around, fortified by block houses, as is fitting for a city with a strong and lasting defense” (125). The deepness of the foundations will ensure their longevity and the height of the walls will shield women from fear. Following these preparatory measures, Rectitude aids in the construction of the buildings, which represent virtue, and Justice helps to populate the city with women of noble spirit, from all levels of the socio-economic hierarchy, and finds a queen fit to rule over them: the Virgin Mary. In this allegorical and idealized metropolis, women would live free of the oppressive influences of the patriarchal power structure that denies them education and forces them into convents or marriage in order to preserve the honor of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Here they could escape the “corrupt old men who are like an incurable leprosy” (129). In Pizan’s imagined city, women could live in equality, solidarity, and good will.

In the early twentieth century, more than five hundred years after Pizan wrote her treatise, Virginia Woolf also longed for a women’s space, and expressed this desire in her text, *A Room of One’s Own*. In it she argues that the acquisition of a private room, inaccessible by men and accompanied by a yearly stipend, would allow women to create

freely, uninhibited by both gender restraints and economic concerns. She explains that her preoccupation with an ideal space for women began at the University of Oxford, where a groundskeeper unceremoniously told her to ‘keep off the grass,’ a space reserved solely for the “Fellows and Scholars” (6), thereby keeping her in her place, both literally and figuratively. She was also prohibited entrance into other male realms within the university, including the library and the chapel. Although she insists, “I had no wish to enter had I the right” (8), the frustration caused by this systematic exclusion is palpable. These spatial experiences cause the author to muse, “I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and . . . of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other” (24). She goes on to consider that the two concessions of individual gendered space and financial support could allow for the creation of a female literary tradition comparable to that of men. For instance, she muses that Shakespeare might have had an equally talented sister, but her socio-economic circumstances would have prevented her from participating in literary circles. Woolf considers the lack of private space to be one of the principal factors that allow men to control women and stifle their creativity. She insists on the necessity of “a room with a lock on the door” (105), which will prevent men from entering. Women must have their own, separate space.

The work of modern spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and Michel de Certeau, is also essential to this study of convent theater. In essence, Lefebvre, Soja, and Certeau all argue for a concept of space that takes into consideration not only physical location, but also social practice, and examines how these two components of space work together. To begin with, Lefebvre explains that physical, mental, and social

factors contribute to “logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice” (11-12). For his part, Certeau concerns himself with “the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” (xiv). Finally, Soja approaches “the inherent spatiality of human life” (1) by way of the “trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality” (10). I intend to show how these modern concepts of space provide us with new approximations to convent theater. Although it may be true, as Palacios Fernández insists, that texts by nun playwrights are not as varied and diverse as those by male authors, I argue that this perceived shortcoming is owing to the influence of the space in which they lived, worked, and worshipped. Their physical surroundings as well as their social and religious practice greatly informed and shaped their writing.

In order to better understand the concept of a women’s space, it is helpful to turn to these important scholars in order to understand their conceptualizations of space itself. To begin with, in his book *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre examines how space is produced through a Marxist lens. He argues that social practices create space, thereby constituting it as a product. His analysis of space in ancient Rome leads him to identify three distinct spatial elements: “*spatial practice*,” “*the representation of space*,” and “*representational space*” (245). The first, spatial practice, concerns itself with the social use of physical spaces, such as roads, cities, and houses, as they relate to the existence of private life within a political society. The author explains that it refers to the relationship between spaces and those practices that imbue them with meaning. The second, the representation of space, points towards maps and grids designed to represent space, and illustrates how we create these models to help us conceive of space. Finally,

representational space indicates the power implicit in certain spaces or spatial practices. Lefebvre explains that it is “dual in character: the masculine principle, military, authoritarian, juridical – and dominant; and the feminine, which, though not denied, is integrated, thrust down into the ‘abyss’ of the earth” (248). He then expands upon this notion of the abyss in his study of Greek society. He notes that within this social order, the feminine realm was centered on the hearth, “a circular, closed and fixed space,” or the oven, the “last relic of the shadowy abyss. Women’s social status was restricted just as their symbolic and practical status was” (248). For the purposes of this study, *spatial practice* and *representational space* are the most essential elements of this spatial triad, since the first requires an understanding of what went on in the convent, and the second necessitates an exploration of the power exercised over the convent space and its inhabitants.

Lefebvre also discusses the history of space. This study, however, focuses on the manifestations of social practice within a space, and the power implicit in that space, rather than on its history. Lefebvre also points out the artificiality of the construction of human space, which is both physical and socio-cultural. Since “social space is produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production” (77), there is no such thing as a neutral or meaningless space. Space is always subject to and affected by ideologies, knowledge, and hegemony. It results from past actions and permits certain new actions while prohibiting others. He also admits that while the concrete elements of space may be unmasked to reveal social reality, this reality is “dual, multiple, plural” (81), and therefore unstable. Lefebvre explains this duality or multiplicity by pointing out that space is both natural and cultural, both immediate and mediated, and both a given and

artificial. Social space, then, is a complex construct that is both formed by and reflects outside social, cultural, and hegemonic influences. In short, space and social practice share a very close connection.

Michel de Certeau, in his study *The Practice of Everyday Life*, develops his theory of space in order to reveal how “the systems of operational combination . . . compose a ‘culture’” (xi). According to de Certeau, spatial practices are an essential feature of these systems, because spaces “correspond to manipulations of the basic elements of a constructed order” and because they, like rhetorical tropes, are “deviations relative to a sort of ‘literal meaning’” (100). Not only do practices define space, but they are also in turn defined by that very same space, with the two elements existing in a type of symbiotic relationship. There exists, then, an inherent and unavoidable correlation between place and identity, between spatiality and society, and between space and hegemonic practices. De Certeau’s emphasis on the social nature of space, although relatable to Lefebvre’s, is much more concerned with the consumer than the product. That is to say, he principally considers how people use the space around them. Although everyday life takes place within controlled systems of production, its consumers are still capable of transforming the “dominant cultural economy” (xiv) in order to further their own interests. I take de Certeau’s message to be twofold: first, that practice and space exercise influence on one another, and, second, that the spatial consumer can adapt in order to escape, to a certain extent, the hegemonic systems that exercise control over space and practice.

Edward W. Soja’s *Thirdspace* is deeply and unmistakably influenced by Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, which he examines and explicates in order to create

an opening for a new concept – that of thirdspace. Soja develops his theory as a way to reveal the “inherent *spatiality of human life*” (1) while confronting social issues that are intrinsically linked to that spatiality. He understands Lefebvre’s “trialectics of spatiality” (53) in a certain manner. According to Soja, Lefebvre’s first element, spatial practices, represents a perceived space. It is both production and reproduction, “producing the material form of social spatiality . . . presented as both medium and outcome of human activity, behavior, and experience” (Soja 66). The second, the representation of space, is the equivalent of a conceived space. It relates to the mental space of design or order, referring not to maps and plans, but to “language, discourse, texts, *logos*: the written and spoken word” (Soja 67). The third element, representational space, which Soja translates as “spaces of representation” (67), directly relates to lived spaces. This is seen as “both distinct from the other two sources and encompassing them” (67), including both the individual’s perception and his or her conception of a space. Based principally on Lefebvre’s third element, Soja rejects the dichotomizing of real and imagined spaces, and instead combines them into the simultaneously real and imagined thirdspace that represents the actual lived experience of the individual. Thirdspace is both place and practice.

Soja’s consideration of feminist writers, as explored in his fourth chapter, “Increasing the Openness of Thirdspace” (106), is particularly influential in my understanding of his unique concept of space. Here the author discusses what he terms “spatial feminism” (108), which has as its goal the undermining of “oppressive social processes and practices” (109). Although Soja’s main concern is urban sprawl and suburbanization, I believe that his theory can be applied to any space inhabited by

women. The concept of questioning space as a patriarchal mechanism of oppression is quite pertinent in the study of literature produced in the confines of the convent, a space which was often used to subjugate and control women, but which women could in some ways appropriate and use as a space of liberation and respite from the control of the patriarchy. Speaking in regards to bell hooks's concept of "radical openness" (124), Soja cites Gillian Rose's explanation that feminist geography simultaneously recognizes the hegemonic discourse and the possibility of resisting it. Thus, it frames the female subject as both marginal and central, both ruled by and rebelling against the patriarchal forces inherent in the space she inhabits, making her both subject and usurper.

These three theories intersect and overlap, and each offers important insight into the concept of space as social practice that I utilize to inform this study of convent theater. Taking into consideration Lefebvre's concept of spatial practice, I consider the physical space of the convent as well as the practices that occur there. One important consideration of space in regards to convent theater is the act of staging the plays. The convents not only provided the nuns with a space to live, work, and worship, but also a place to perform. Nun playwrights such as Sor Marcela and Sor Francisca did not intend for their theatrical works to be confined to the printed page, as the texts themselves indicate. Performance theory provides the scholar with unique insight into these types of text, in which theatricality abounds. Theatricality, defined as "a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation" (Postlewait 1), is absolutely key to realizing these plays' potential for production and thereby taking into account the need for theatrical space within the convent. As in the *comedias* themselves, convent theater very rarely supplies stage directions, which

indicates that nun playwrights privileged the message of their drama over the technical aspects of staging their plays. The lack of stage directions, however, does not mean that these works were excluded from the rich performance tradition of early modern Iberia. For example, the dialogue they contain often affords us clues concerning stage directions, indicating that the practitioners of this type of theater did indeed stage the plays *intramuros*. Convent theater may appear pared down in comparison to the commercial theater of the time period, but it most certainly does not lack theatricality.

Beyond implicit stage directions, references to costuming, singing, and dancing within the dialogue are also clearly evocative of the theatrical tradition, and physical evidence of these elements still remains. In fact, Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto's convent in Valladolid provides us with an important clue about the performance of these plays. This Convent of the Discalced Carmelites houses a trunk filled with costumes, which still resides in the common area known as the *sala de recreación*. In fact, the eleven nuns who currently live there use these costumes for their own modern-day productions. It is highly unlikely and improbable that these are the same costumes used to stage Cecilia and María's works, but they do evidence a long-standing performance tradition within the convent. Although most first-hand accounts of performance in this and other convents have unfortunately not survived, the presence of both costumes and spaces designated for recreation indicate the presence of a performance tradition. Spaces such as patios, courtyards, and gardens could have lent themselves well to theatrical productions within the convent, and the continuing performance tradition within the convents indicates that the nuns still use these spaces to stage their plays. I argue that not only can we study the convent as a performance space,

but also that a study of space may be the best tool at our disposal to better appreciate and comprehend this unique form of theater.

Beyond its importance to the performance aspect of drama, the space of the convent influenced the content and purpose of many of these plays, as well. This space did indeed allow women to cohabitate, coexist, and create, thus allowing for the possibility of the creation of a strong community of women. This always occurred, however, under the auspices of male administrators, such as a confessor or ecumenical leader. It seems, then, that a space which does not exist independently from the control or authority of men cannot truly be “a room of one’s own.” However, as Soja points out, a “paradoxical geography” (125), in which one is both subject to and rebels against hegemonic discourse, is possible in thirdspace. This space of independence is noted by Asunción Lavrin, who explains that convents were “the only gender specific institutions . . . that allowed women to carry out an almost independent life in niches created for their exclusive use” (1). Some convent drama, for example, features prescriptive messages intended to encourage the nuns to live up to their full *varonil* potential, as in Sor Marcela de San Félix’s spiritual colloquies. Other plays stage the rejection of men in favor of women as the seat of reason and authority, as in Sor Maria do Ceo’s *autos*. The space in which these women lived, worked, and wrote inspired them to push the boundaries of early modern gender norms, cultivate a feminine literary tradition, usurp and appropriate the male gaze, and utilize male dominated theatrical forms in order to further their own spiritual advancement and to foment a strong sense of community within the cloister.

The spatial theories I have discussed here allow a unique approximation to these works, but they can also, in certain aspects, be problematic in this context. Christine

Pizan's allegorical imaginings of a city solely for ladies, for example, touts both the education of women and the exclusion of men. Her creation is an imaginary locus that will allow women to live in harmony with one another and to be free from the oppressive practices of the patriarchy. The convent clearly shares many of these attributes, since only women reside therein, and it affords its residents creative and educational opportunities they would most likely not be able to find outside of the cloister, such as reading, writing, painting, singing, acting, and directing. It is also a unique space that, in theory, fosters female solidarity. However, as Sor Marcela illustrates in her *autos*, this sense of community does not occur naturally, but rather must be cultivated with love and patience. We must recognize that a group of cloistered women does not automatically a kindly society make. Additionally, all residents of Pizan's ideal city are willing participants in a female culture, while ingress into the convent was not always voluntary. Although many women felt drawn to the convent, convents also "became repositories for daughters of the nobility and wealthy urban classes, prisons for the 'dishonored' or 'disobedient'" (Arenal and Schlau 3). Of course, the biggest difficulty in applying Pizan's concept is that hers is an imagined, allegorical, and perfect community, and the nuns lived in a real, factual, and flawed society. While Pizan's walls were built by symbolic figures and made of fictional mortar, the nuns inhabited actual edifices of stone and brick constructed by men whose principle concern was the enclosure and control of women. As Elissa Weaver points out, it was here that "the Church sought to enforce reform with mortar" (23). We must remember that Pizan's ideal metropolis does not necessarily correspond to the reality of the early modern convent.

In Woolf's treatise on women and fiction, she envisions a space free of patriarchal control that would give women "the courage to write exactly what we think" (113). Although women often found more creative opportunities within the convent than without, they could not necessarily write exactly what they thought. They veiled and hid their subtle subversions in complex layers of meaning and couched their criticism in self-deprecation and humility. They did not experience as much freedom of expression as Woolf hopes for in her text. Besides requiring a room of one's own, a yearly stipend also figures prominently in Woolf's hypothesis, as this would free the woman writer from "the reprehensible poverty of our sex" (21) that burdens her and forces her to labor to support herself. Implicit in this stipulation is the idea that money can buy one time. If women were free from work duties and home responsibilities, they could devote their time and effort to writing. Nun playwrights enjoyed at least one, but not necessarily both of these factors. Although it is true that many did have a room, or rather cell, of their own, they were not free from duties within the convent. Fortunately for some nuns, not all were burdened with many domestic chores. For instance, when Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento and her sister Sor María de San Alberto were not engaged in prayer, they "were free to devote themselves to administrative tasks and to the arts" (Arenal and Schlau 134). Although we cannot know how they divided their time between the arts and the administration of the convent, each of these two women held important positions of leadership, including Mother Superior, Mistress of Novices, Prioress, Subprioress, Doorkeeper, and Sacristan. Surely their duties to the convent took priority over writing drama. Perhaps this is why Palacios Fernández attacks their dramatic works as being inferior to those written by

men. They could only create in the limited time available to them after first attending to their conventional responsibilities, but they at least had a place in which to write.

Lefebvre's three-pronged approach to spatial theory, which he terms the 'trailectics' of spatiality, also sheds a great deal of light on this consideration of space within the convent. His concept of spatial practice allows insight into the importance of the social practices that occur within a space, while his explanation of representational space reminds us that each space is imbued with power. Lefebvre's historicist bent and the notion of the representation of space, however, is somewhat difficult to employ with this type of drama, since it is difficult to know for certain how the nuns represented the space in which they lived. Although some sources do exist to enlighten our understanding of the representation of convent space, such as Roberto García Moll's architectural study of the ruins of Sor Juana's convent in Mexico, these are few and far between. I believe that the most important lesson to take away from Lefebvre's study of space is that it is subject to influence from the hegemonic discourse. For the purposes of this project, this means that even in the protected, enclosed space of the convent, the women who resided there felt the pervasive and sometimes oppressive influence of the patriarchy, notwithstanding the fact that they lived beyond the control of the male realm, at least in theory.

De Certeau's study of everyday life and its consumers illustrates the close relationship between social practice and space while indicating that the consumers of that space are capable of resisting the hegemonic systems of control inherent in the practices that constitute that space. The most glaring difficulty with the application of de Certeau's approach, however, is that he does not take gender into account. In point of fact, he

dedicates his book “to the common man,” or rather, “a common hero” (v). His work does not account for difference, but instead “ignores the differential constraints imposed on users, and the ways in which dominant modes of representation and spatial organization assist in the continuing domination of some ‘users’ (women) by others (men)” (Langer 123). While de Certeau does not take into account these methods of control, any study of convent theater must necessarily do so. Although the nuns usually had the opportunity to create a fairly autonomous society within the convent, they were not free from oversight by male ecclesiastic leaders and church politics that often made their presence felt *intramuros*. Nuns frequently felt the oppressive control of this supervision, as when Cecilia del Nacimiento suffered exile as a result of corresponding with her confessor, who, unbeknownst to her, had fallen out of favor with Spanish church authorities. These women were not beyond the reach of the long arm of the patriarchy, and their resistance and reaction to it can be seen in their texts.

Soja’s insights on the social nature of space help clarify and modernize Lefebvre’s trialectics of spatiality in order to understand the simultaneously real and imagined lived space that he dubs thirdspace, and his spatial feminism relates directly to the purpose of this dissertation. The difficulty I find in applying Soja’s theory is that he speaks within a framework of geography, as indicated by the application of his ideas to actual locations such as Los Angeles and its environs. Since we cannot explore all of the convent spaces where these nun playwrights lived, either because the convents themselves have been destroyed or because nuns currently inhabit them, they are, in a sense, imagined. In some instances, like that of the Convento da Rosa in Lisbon, we can only hypothesize what these spaces were like based on scant historical evidence. What I

take away from Soja, then, is the importance of considering space as both place and practice, one being inseparable from the other. The second relevant concept in his study is the paradoxical idea that those functioning in this lived space can both recognize the power of hegemony present there and maintain the possibility of the subversion of that power. Likewise, women in convents were acutely aware of the imbalance of power that allowed men to exercise control over them, but they utilized their writing in an attempt to undermine and even subvert that control.

My own conceptualization of space takes Pizan, Woolf, Lefebvre, de Certeau, and Soja into consideration. For the purposes of this analysis of convent theater, it is imperative that I take into account both the physical nature of the convent, an enclosed space inhabited only by women, and practices that occur there, such as worship, writing, and learning. I also look for points of resistance to hegemonic discourse in the texts themselves, paying attention to the different methods and approaches that the nun playwrights utilized to subvert the patriarchy and, as Woolf says, to attempt to “write exactly what we think.” Considerations of space serve as a framework within which to study the appropriation of the *mujer varonil* trope, the anxiety of authorship and that creation of a tradition of women writers, the inversion of scopophilia and the male gaze, and the theatricality and performative nature of plays written, directed, and performed *intramuros*.

In the first chapter, I explore Sor Marcela de San Félix’s *coloquios espirituales* and her appropriation of this trope, since she worked against the traditional presentation of the *mujer varonil* in order to further her own ideas about the ability of women to rise above the negative characteristics assigned to them. As a point of departure, I use Susan

Smith's assertion that for Sor Marcela, the *mujer varonil* is "la mujer que aguanta con fuerte resistencia las dificultades y deprivaciones de la vida conventual; una resistencia más aparejada a la del varón" (29). What Smith does not seem to take into account here is the uniqueness of a *varonilidad* that is permanent and irreversible. Rather than forcing the main female character to revert to her original characterization and abandon her newfound authority and control, as occurs in the traditional *comedia* ending, Sor Marcela's plays allow her protagonist not only to develop *varonilidad*, but to maintain it, as well. Her *coloquios espirituales* portray the cultivation of *varonil* characteristics not as a temporary side effect of gendered performance, but rather as positive and attainable qualities that both the author and her sisters must develop in order to take their place in Heaven as true brides of Christ. In fact, I believe that Sor Marcela's experience in the convent and her close association with so many other like-minded women led her to create strong female characters whose characterization suggests that traits such as judgment and reason are not exclusive to men, but rather fundamental to the nature of women. As Smith and Sabat de Rivers point out in their edition of Sor Marcela's colloquies, the playwright "repite lugares comunes con respecto a la mujer – que es mudable, débil, caprichosa y cambia de opinión fácilmente" only because she intends to "hacer de Alma ejemplo de lo contrario: una mujer fuerte y constante" (162). As a result, the spectator observes a developing, changing, growing female protagonist who becomes more *varonil* with every correct decision she makes, and whom the patriarchy does not ultimately subjugate.

In the chapter dealing with Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto, the examination of their works centers around Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's postulation

that female authors desire to create a tradition of women writers. Playing on Harold Bloom's Freudian concept of the anxiety of influence, Gilbert and Gubar define this "battle for self-creation" as the "anxiety of authorship" (49). This anxiety stems from a lack of female precursors, and is exacerbated by the pressures of a patriarchal insistence that women cannot and should not write. As a result, women must rely on "the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture" (51) to break away from patriarchal control. Arenal and Schlauf make reference to this concept of the formulation of a "creative female subculture" (Gilbert and Gubar 51) when they note that nuns utilize certain stratagems in their writing "for overcoming anxiety of authorship" (14). These playwrights do so by creating strong female characters, promoting the mystic ideation of direct communication with the divine, and emphasizing the role of the mother in the life of Christ. Both Cecilia and María "created from a woman-centered world view" (Arenal and Schlauf 136) and worked collaboratively with this goal in mind. Their work was deeply affected by each other as well as by the intellectual influence of their biological mother, Cecilia Morillas, and the religious and literary influence of their spiritual mothers, Sor Teresa de Jesús and the Virgin Mary. I explore how this strong sisterhood and the anxiety of authorship makes itself known in the drama of these women, as they consciously look to their predecessors while paving the way for other women writers to follow in their footsteps. Some critics have indeed taken note of the collaboration that occurred between these women and the influence they exercised on one another as an interesting and important biographical or historical note. None, however, have explored how their texts manifest this interaction or how they seek to further a tradition of women writers.

In addition to utilizing Gilbert and Gubar's concept of the anxiety of authorship as an investigative tool, I employ another technique that critics have not yet considered in conjunction with the study of convent theater. Laura Mulvey's application of Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze in her feminist study of film and Barbara Freedman's use of this same concept in her study of theater open new avenues of criticism in this field. Perhaps critics have not employed the concept of the male gaze in convent theater because the convent was, quite possibly, the only place in Spanish society where women were almost completely free from the objectification of the male gaze. I posit, however, that the general absence of the male gaze within the convent does not imply that the nuns were not aware of its influence and its effect on women. In truth, stories of so-called *devotos* pursuing amorous relationships with nuns imply otherwise, as does the fact that nuns met with their male confessors face to face, separated only by a row of iron bars. In point of fact, I believe that Sor Maria do Ceo appropriates the male gaze and turns it back on itself as a way of creating a strong female protagonist that forces the audience to consider the traditional Marian figure in novel ways, and that the playwright uses this inversion to bestow her with power and authority. For example, in Sor Maria's *Clavel, y Rosa*, her protagonist deflects the gaze of the male figures onstage, and usurps it in order to objectify them, thereby stopping them from objectifying her. Sor Maria's plays are in keeping with Gilbert and Gubar's assertion that "even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures" (77-78). Although the Marian figures in her works certainly do not appear overly aggressive towards the patriarchy, her female

protagonists do hold sway over and demand respect from the other characters onstage, both male and female. Sor Maria's Rosa is fiercely independent.

Even though a few scholars have shown interest in Sor Maria's drama, another Portuguese nun playwright has almost completely escaped detection. This woman, Sor Violante do Ceo, was a very successful and celebrated writer in her day. We know that she not only penned poetry, but also authored three plays, none of which are extant. Although we can only guess at the themes and tropes used in her lost *comedias*, we do know that they were of a religious nature. Even though no documentation of performance exists for *El hijo esposo, y hermano* or *La vitoria por la cruz*, it is certain that her *La transformación por Dios*, centered on Santa Eugenia, was performed for Felipe III upon his arrival in Lisbon in 1619 (*Historia e Antologia* 12). Therefore, Sor Violante was clearly aware of theatrical tropes and the performance aspect of drama, and she obviously wrote her plays to be staged, and not for silent reading. I contend that considering her works in the context of the stage is essential to garner a full understanding of them. Unfortunately, we cannot analyze her lost plays, but I propose that it is possible to look for similar elements of staging in her *villancicos*. No critics have ever considered these works as anything more than poetry, or, at the most, songs "destinados ao canto na liturgia do Natal" (*História e Antologia* 34). While they are indeed of great poetic value, I believe these *villancicos* have performance potential, as well.

Although, for the most part, literary critics have either ignored or undervalued convent theater, I believe it is a cultural and literary phenomenon that cannot be discounted. Nun playwrights were both removed from and part of the world around them. As Arenal and Schlau point out, "in their convents, these women both withdrew from

their society and triumphed over it” (17). To ignore these nun playwrights would be to fail to appreciate and consider an essential and integral aspect of early modern literature and culture. Recent scholarship has brought many of these texts to light and offered opportunities for understanding them and recognizing their value. Notwithstanding these advances, many avenues are still unexplored and I approximate these plays in novel ways. This project creates a new framework in which to consider these texts by going beyond the current pattern of simply situating them historically and socially. Instead, I consider how space, as both place and practice, impacted these women and made itself manifest within their works.

Besides approaching these plays in a new way by placing them within a spatial framework, each of the chapters in this dissertation either expands on current literary studies or considers convent theater in a new light. The discussion of Sor Marcela’s *coloquios espirituales* develops Susan Smith’s postulation of *Alma* as a *mujer varonil* to study how that *varonilidad* comes about and the significance of its irreversibility. In this way, I show that Sor Marcela worked against the traditional presentation of the *mujer varonil* in order to further her own ideas about the ability of women to appropriate for themselves the characteristics traditionally assigned to men. Since Arenal and Schlau have already noted the role of the anxiety of authorship in nuns’ writings in general, the contribution of this dissertation to this supposition is an investigation of how that anxiety, along with the influence of literary foremothers, makes itself manifest in the works of Sor María de San Alberto and Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento. The application of Mulvey’s and Freedman’s gaze studies to convent theater criticism in this study is also original, particularly as it relates to the characterization of the ubiquitous Virgin Mary figure that

appears in Sor Maria do Ceo's plays. Sor Violante's *villancicos* have completely escaped the critics' notice due to their limited availability. The approach to these works via performance criticism, therefore, constitutes a new contribution to the field. By studying convent theater in these ways, I hope not only to contribute new ideas to the field and novel approaches to the texts, but also to encourage literary critics to consider these plays as an essential element of early modern culture, and to prove their literary merit.

CHAPTER I

Skirts and Swords: The New *Mujer Varonil* in Sor Marcela de San Félix

“Early modern clerics always assumed that women (even nuns)
were biologically and intellectually the weaker sex.”
Asunción Lavrin

As one of the essential defining elements of the culture of early modern Iberia, theater maintained a ubiquitous and powerful presence throughout the peninsula, as well as abroad in the expanses of empire. While people from every social class and group, from the *mosqueteros* to the clergy to the nobles, crowded the *Corral del Príncipe* in Madrid, Jesuits such as José de Anchieta used their knowledge of theater half a world away, in what is now Brazil, to preach to and convert previously unknown groups of indigenous people through their staging of *autos sacramentales*. The popularity of theatrical genres such as the *comedia*, the *loa*, the *auto*, and the *entremés* extended all the way from the center of the metropole to the edges of empire, and theater consistently dominated the general cultural imagination. In fact, such was the impact and reach of theater on the Iberian Peninsula that it even managed to find its way into the liminal and marginalized space of the convent. It is, of course, rather hard to ascertain exactly how widespread this phenomenon became, due to the difficulty, even today, of recovering sources that for many scholars are unimportant, inaccessible, or simply unknown.

As slow progress is made in this field, we are often pleasantly surprised to discover true talent among these unsung nuns with plume in hand. Sor Marcela de San Félix happily falls into this category. Born in Toledo in 1605, Marcela was the illegitimate but publicly recognized daughter of the famed playwright Lope de Vega and the actress Micaela de Luján. Micaela raised her daughter until her romantic relationship with Lope de Vega ended in 1608. From this point on, no record of Micaela exists, leading us to assume that she either disappeared or died. A trusted family servant named Catalina began to care for the two-year-old Marcela, along with her younger brother from the same union, Lope Félix. Lope de Vega's second wife, Juana Guardo, passed away in 1613, at which point the celebrated author took in the eight-year-old Marcela. Making reference to Marcela's unusual upbringing, *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature* points out that "in addition to the instability of her situation, she was stigmatized by her illegitimate birth, making it tempting to surmise that the desire for permanence formed part of her motivation to leave her father's house and enter a convent" (Pérez 542). After living with her father for eight years, Marcela became a novice at the tender age of sixteen² in the Convent of San Ildefonso in Madrid in 1621, becoming Sor Marcela de San Félix. A year later, in 1622, she permanently joined the community of the Discalced Trinitarians, and lived and wrote in the convent until her death in 1687 at the age of 82 (Smith and Sabat de Rivers 16). Her ingress into the convent and her participation in the Trinitarian order allowed her to shed the unfortunate

² According to Tridentine guidelines, sixteen was the minimum legal age of consent to join a religious cloistered order.

social stigma of her illegitimacy and to take on a powerful new identity, both as the bride of Christ and as a spiritual mother within the church.³

Regrettably, Sor Marcela's account of her life has not survived. Although she filled five volumes with her writing, "she burned four, and her spiritual autobiography was also consigned to the flames at the direction of her confessor" (Kaminsky 350). Although Sor Marcela's autobiographical text did not survive, Susan Smith has published an edition of her *vida*, which was passed on initially through oral tradition and eventually recorded by an unknown hand. This *vida* provides us with an account of her spiritual life within the convent, but reveals very little of Sor Marcela's life before taking her vows. As her unknown biographer explains, only Sor Marcela's collection of colloquies remained in the convent, and although she wrote the other four volumes "con su gran talento y espíritu, su humildad y modestia la obligó a quemarlos y éste sólo reservó por obediencia" (Smith, *El convento* 74). This act, meant as an outward show of humility, keeps us from knowing exactly how much exposure to secular theater she experienced before taking her vows, but some historical sources do indicate that she was well aware of and immersed in her father's sphere. Indeed, Barbara Mujica points out that considering the chaos of Sor Marcela's childhood, convent life must have seemed quite calm by comparison (*Women Writers* 194). It is extremely probable, then, that she would have had intimate knowledge of the world of theater in Madrid, including tropes such as the cross-dressing *mujer varonil*.

³ Unfortunately, it seems that Sor Marcela was not pleased with the importance she gained within the convent, once telling her fellow nuns, "Dichosas vosotras, hijas mías, que os habéis hecho pequeñitas en el monasterio, pero pobre de mí que he venido a hacer más papel que había en el mundo donde era una desválida que no merecía que me mirasen a la cara" (Smith, *El convento* 74)

Despite her early experience with and participation in the world of secular theater, for all intents and purposes, Sor Marcela and nuns like her lived their lives on the edges of society. Although the monastic experience was an indispensable element of Catholic life in Spain, the nuns themselves were not truly an integrated part of Spanish social life. In many regards, they existed on the margins, creating a societal microcosm *intramuros*. They were usually separated from their family members, often watched and controlled closely by their male confessors and ecclesiastical leaders, and always kept from ever venturing out in public.⁴ Many went hungry and barefoot, while others even habitually employed self-flagellation in order to submit the flesh to the will of the Father. Specifically, Sor Marcela's order was committed to the principles of prayer, meditation, humility, and penitence; all practiced while remaining dedicated to the recovery of captives⁵ and providing charity for the poor, requiring them to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Speaking specifically of Sor Marcela, her biographer notes that "Todos sus discursos se encaminaban a cómo había de mortificarse más y más sus sentidos, siendo más feliz su discurso en hallar caminos de mortificarse y afligirse que el de los mundanos estudiosos de dar gusto al cuerpo y sensualidad, nuestros declarados enemigos" (Smith, *El convento* 62). The nuns lived a life of constant denial, both self-imposed and institutional.

Notwithstanding the many restrictions imposed on them because of their cloistered state, these women created a rich cultural and artistic life within the confines of the convent, which allowed many early modern nuns to both write and perform plays,

⁴ One of the changes made by the Council of Trent was the permanent enclosure of all female religious. Before the Council of Trent, most orders were not rigorous about keeping nuns inside of the convent or keeping their family members out.

⁵ This charitable mission is clearly evident in the iconography of the convent as evidenced in the chapel adjacent to it, which prominently features chains and shackles.

which “not only entertained and diverted, but also educated and strengthened the commitment to shared values” (Van Whye 5). These plays were considered appropriate for the convent as long as they followed the rules set out in the *Ceremonial del convento*, written specifically for Sor Marcela’s convent. This text provided the Trinitarian nuns with a set of strict guidelines. It explains,

En dichas recreaciones podrán hablar unas con otras de cosas espirituales, e indiferentes; excusando todo género de murmuraciones, y altercaciones, de manera, que antes salgan las Religiosas edificadas, que divertidas dellas, porque han de servir de dar algún alivio al natural, no de distracción, ni menos observancia. (Sanz 220-21)

The nuns most likely produced these plays during the hour of recreation, which was usually the hour after lunch or dinner, although ecclesiastical leaders also allowed the nuns to dedicate two whole days per year to recreation, as well as one afternoon per month to spend in the garden. In Sor Marcela’s convent, the nuns put on plays “particularmente las noches de Pascuas y grandes festividades en que las religiosas tenían algún alivio para desahogo del natural abrumado de las comunes observancias” (Smith, *El convento* 70). We know from continued theatrical tradition in other convents that plays are and were performed both in the *sala de recreo* and in the convent’s *huerta*. These spaces are important because “spatial structure . . . embodies knowledge of social relations, or the taken-for-granted rules that govern relations of individuals to each other and to society” (Spain 7). In other words, where the plays were written and performed, as well as the activities that occurred in these spaces, influence the plays themselves. It is important to note that this recreational space was one of equality, where all nuns could participate in the theatrical production, either as spectators or performers. Ideally, it is a space that should encourage solidarity among the sisters through a shared experience.

Since “Every discourse says something about a space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is emitted from a space” (Lefebvre 132), the performance space cannot be evaluated in isolation, and neither can Sor Marcela’s plays. Since place and practice are “complementary instead of mutually exclusive” (Spain 6), the production of theater influenced the space in which it was produced and vice versa.

In this chapter, I focus on the writings of Sor Marcela, arguably the most prolific nun playwright of her time, particularly on her *coloquios espirituales*, although it is important to note that she also wrote *loas*, *romances*, *seguidillas*, *liras*, *endechas*, and *villancicos*. Her literary prowess is impressive, as Alison P. Weber points out when she takes note of Sor Marcela’s “keen wit, dramatic skill, and lyrical gifts” (241). Sor Marcela penned fourteen convent plays, including six spiritual colloquies, or short religious allegorical plays, in which the female character “Alma” passes through many trials and tribulations in order to become perfected as she attempts to leave the temptations of the world behind. In these allegorical dramas, characters such as Pureza, Contemplación, Apetito, Mentira, and Verdad all compete for the soul’s attention, thus serving as a kind of figurative mirror in which Sor Marcela and her sisters were able to see their own spiritual struggles embodied and brought to life onstage. In this way, her colloquies reflect the larger place and practice of the convent, since these character names are intrinsic in both convent language and culture, as evidence by Sor Marcela’s *vida*, where her biographer often repeats terms such as “mortificación” (Smith, *El convento* 62), “celo” (77) and “obediencia” (76). Unquestionably, the type of theater Sor Marcela penned was meant to instruct her fellow sisters of the order, and her *coloquios espirituales* nicely exemplify the didactic nature of the extant convent theater of the

Golden Age. Although she clearly designed her largely underappreciated but ingenious works with didactic intent in mind, these theatrical pieces tend to reflect more inward than outward, concurrently revealing both the creation and the creator while imposing their message externally on the spectators. Sor Marcela's plays embody and encapsulate the monastic experience while simultaneously projecting counsel and guidance.

Since her spiritual colloquies are allegories, it is important to note the similarities and differences between her works and the allegorical theater of her counterparts writing *extramuros*, such as *autos sacramentales*. Sor Marcela's allegorical plays feature the character of Alma. The presence of a female protagonist is unusual, and not characteristic of this type of theater. As Smith points out, in allegorical dramas written by men, the main character is usually Reason or *el Hombre*, and not Alma, since "the writers assumed, of course, that man and reason are one and the same, interchangeable nouns" ("The Female Trinity" 241). The use of a female rather than a male protagonist in a work meant to have universal application is telling. Not only does Sor Marcela utilize a female protagonist, but also in her drama "we see the disappearance of both man and reason" (242). Whereas *autos sacramentales* by authors such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca emphasized "reconciling the spiritual life of *man* with his physical existence" (Ziomek 163; my emphasis), I argue that Sor Marcela's works focus specifically on reconciling the spiritual life of *woman* with her physical existence, specifically the sisters of the Discalced Trinitarians with whom she lived, worked, and worshipped.

This instruction appears on two planes within the context of the performance of the plays. The advice and direction offered to the protagonist by her dramatic sisters-in-arms mirrors that which the performance of the play proffers the members of the

audience. Since Sor Marcela wrote her *Coloquios del alma* as an extended allegory, the character of Alma appears as a direct reflection or a representation of each nun participating in the spectacle. Each woman in attendance must identify with and follow Alma's example if she is to be successful in her lofty spiritual endeavors. In order to accomplish this goal, Sor Marcela appropriates the popular *comedia* trope of the *mujer varonil* and makes it her own by "translating the masculine into the feminine" (Arenal and Schlau 232). In the *comedia*, the tremendously popular *mujer varonil* trope utilized male costuming as the most obvious and crowd-pleasing indicator of a character's gender bending, as famously referenced by Lope de Vega in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* when he makes it clear that "suele / el disfraz varonil agradar mucho" (282-83). Sor Marcela's Alma, on the other hand, does not require any sort of masculine dress to accomplish her goal. Rather than relying on costuming to guide the audience's understanding, the spectators would only have been able to identify Alma as a *varonil* character through her adoption of assumedly masculine virtues, as expressed in her dialogue and actions throughout the colloquies. To explore how Sor Marcela employed and modified this trope, I utilize two important studies on the *mujer varonil* phenomenon as points of departure.

Carmen Bravo-Villasante's *La mujer vestida de hombre en el teatro español* explores cross-dressed female characters in the works of several different playwrights, and her argument focuses mostly on the function of the *mujer varonil* in specific plays, noting that "el disfraz varonil servía a maravilla para la confusión y la falsa apariencia" (71). Merveena McKendrick's *Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age*, on the other hand, moves beyond merely discussing the presence of cross-dressed

women, and creates categories for them in order to understand the phenomenon in a more comprehensive manner. She explains that in Golden Age drama, the term *mujer varonil* is one of praise, not derision, and that the authors of *comedias* often show their admiration for women who behave more like men, which allows them to successfully navigate the masculine realm. The traditional *comedia* ending, however, forces these female characters to relinquish their temporary *varonil* persona, since their return to enacting socially acceptable gender roles revokes the power afforded to them by passing as male. Sor Marcela's *coloquios*, on the other hand, employ a fairly noticeable feminism, which pushes the boundaries of early modern gender norms a bit further than does the *comedia* as a whole.

While Sor Marcela's plays certainly encourage a wide range of monastic virtues, from moderation to self-denial, this study focuses more on the characterization of Alma as a *mujer varonil* than on the straightforward religious allegory that dominates these texts. In the insightful introduction to the student edition of four of Sor Marcela's *coloquios*, which she published with Georgina Sabat de Rivers, Smith touches on this very idea when she notes the presence of the *mujer varonil* as a thematic element. She states that in this context, the *mujer varonil* is not a cross-dressing, sword-wielding dynamo, but rather "la mujer que aguanta con fuerte resistencia las dificultades y deprivaciones de la vida conventual; una resistencia más aparejada a la del varón" (29). In this chapter I will expand upon Smith's insight in order to explore questions of gender and solidarity in *La muerte del apetito*, *La estimación de la religión*, *De virtudes*, and *El celo indiscreto* in relation to their representation of *la mujer varonil* not as a cross-

dressed woman, but rather as the ideal example and embodiment of spiritual values to be emulated by Sor Marcela's spiritual sisters of the Discalced Trinitarian order.

Because Sor Marcela's works still find themselves outside of the literary canon, despite the recent academic and critical focus on them by several prominent scholars, a short summary of each play is in order. As allegorical dramas, their plots are fairly straightforward, although not overly simplistic. Although she wrote six *coloquios espirituales*, not all of them feature the character of Alma. In *Del nacimiento*, Alma is secondary to the monastic virtues Piedad, Contemplación, Devoción, and Regocijo as they celebrate the birth of Christ, and *Del santísimo sacramento* does not include Alma at all, and in this way stands apart from the others. For this reason, I focus this chapter mainly on the four plays that center on Alma's development as a *mujer varonil*. Smith and Sabat de Rivers's student edition of Sor Marcela's autos include only *La muerte del apetito*, *La estimación de la religión*, *De virtudes*, and *El celo indiscreto*, since, as Smith points out, these plays alone form a set that tracks Alma's spiritual progression. She points out that the first two take place outside of the convent, while the second two occur after Alma has taken her vows. The protagonist's *varonilidad* increases exponentially in each one.

In the first of the two *coloquios* set before Alma's entry into the convent, *Muerte del apetito*, the main character begins her fight against her natural inclinations as she decides between giving in to *Apetito*, or following the much more arduous path of self-denial. As the play opens, we find Alma caught between her desire to live a virtuous life and her unwillingness to face the difficulty of suppressing physical desires. *Mortificación* tries to offer her exhortations and guidance, to which Alma is initially quite resistant. She

shies away from the demanding nature of such a restricted existence in favor of siding with *Apetito* as he employs his powers of persuasion to seduce her with his carnal nature. Nevertheless, the virtuous *Mortificación*, through her patience and rhetorical prowess, is eventually able to show the indecisive *Alma* the error of her ways. Although *Mortificación* successfully convinces the protagonist that she should overcome the persistent advances of the soul's nemesis by eliminating him, *Alma* quickly discovers that she cannot kill *Apetito* alone. In fact, she realizes that she is unable to do so even with the help of *Mortificación* and her sister, *Oración*.⁶ While *Alma* vocalizes her yearning for the arrival and support of *Mortificación*'s second sister, *Desnudez*, *Apetito* laments this character's pending arrival, knowing that he is no match for *Mortificación* and *Oración*'s stricter sibling. He simply cannot triumph against this virtuous triumvirate sisterhood, although *Desnudez* is forced to strangle him twice, due to the fact that he proves to be surprisingly resistant to such action. *Alma* then suggests burying him in the garden in order to make sure he is dead, since all three women rightly suspect that he has faked his demise. Later, *Apetito* confirms their suspicions when he rises from the dead a third time. Towards the end of the play, *Alma* binds her enemy as she and *Desnudez* restrain him so that *Mortificación* can run the villain through with a sharp sword. The women rejoice together over their violent victory and the two sisters promise to help maintain the protagonist on the straight and narrow path during the never-ending struggle for self-denial.

In *Estimación de la religión*, *Alma* employs two maidservants, one of which, *Mentira*, tries desperately to sow discord between her mistress and her rival, *Verdad*, in

⁶ Although *Mortificación* mentions her sister here, *Oración* does not appear until the third *coloquio espiritual*, *De virtudes*.

order to further her own purposes. Intriguingly, Mentira impresses Alma with her noble lineage, as the daughter of Diablo and Soberbia. She even provides her mistress with a laundry list of impressive relatives, such as Traición, Enredo, Engaño, Cautela, and Sinrazón, in hopes of winning her over. Conversely, Alma openly and quite vocally resents Verdad's attempts to convince her of Mentira's deception, who plays on Alma's sympathies by telling her that Verdad had callously attempted to murder several of the previously mentioned members of her family. As Verdad slowly falls out of favor with her mistress, Mentira uses Alma's increased compassion for her in order to gain entry for a rich older gentleman, named Mundo, and his manservant, Interés. Verdad warns Alma against his excesses, pointing out that his house is a place of self-indulgence "sin límite" (972), but Mentira quickly undermines her nemesis by portraying her as the worst kind of wet blanket. Alma soon realizes her mistake, however, when Sor Marcela introduces the character of Religión, who presents the convent as a foil to Mundo's pleasure house. Precisely because of Religión's description of the convent as a safe paradise, where the nuns' difficult challenges ultimately bring them closer to God, Alma decides to join this community of women, and in so doing unites with them in a common, devout purpose. The play concludes as Verdad instructs Alma, "La Mentira acá la deja / con el Mundo miserable" (1453-54), after which Mundo and Mentira sarcastically complain about one another before admonishing the audience not to fall into the worldly traps they have set.

The third colloquy, *De virtudes*, begins *in medias res*, after Alma has entered the convent. The play begins as Tibieza tries to convince Alma that being Oración's friend is much too difficult and rigorous. Oración, sister to Mortificación,⁷ makes her first

⁷ Another of her sisters, Devoción, is introduced but does not emerge at any time during the play.

appearance onstage, but Alma resolves to abandon her in order to have more time for herself. As a response, Oración chides her inconstant friend by asking her what her husband would think of such behavior, thus informing the spectators that Alma has already taken her spiritual vows in order to become the bride of Christ. Once she reproves Alma, Oración becomes the mediator between the spiritual spouses. She is also Alma's guide as she attempts to navigate the demands of convent life, such as the lack of sufficient sleep and food. As a faithful friend, Oración reminds Alma that if she desires to inherit heavenly riches and a celestial mansion, she can only do so by foregoing such pleasures in this mortal existence. When Alma decides to fully embrace the monastic experience, Amor, a representation of Christ, lovingly instructs her, "Ven, Alma mía, y haré / que descanses en mis brazos" (779-80). Alma brings the play to a close as she rejoices both in Amor's invitation and in her decision to serve God rather than man.

In *Celo indiscreto*, the fourth and final colloquy of the set, Alma declares her love for and obedience to Paz, but her proclaimed level of devotion appears in stark contrast to Alma's friendship with and acceptance of Celo. For her part, Alma is blinded by Celo's zealous and overly critical nature, claiming that his self-righteous behavior makes him a saint to be emulated. Without Paz, however, she cannot be perfect, since peace is garnered from inward obedience and devotion rather than from policing those around her. Celo, however, attempts to strictly enforce rules of conduct and demands proper behavior of others. Sor Marcela introduces another character, Sinceridad, who appears to reflect the audience's reaction to both the characters and the action of the play. She responds favorably to Celo at first, when he seems to be at his most saintly, but soon tires of him as

he proves to be increasingly more tiresome as the play progresses. The rejection of Celso on the part of both Alma and Sinceridad causes his behavior to become increasingly more erratic as he begins to espouse humorous delusions of grandeur. He compares himself to both the prior and the abbess, and insists on the absolute necessity of his involvement in everyone else's business. His insanity runs so deep that he expresses immense concern about insignificant details over which he clearly has no control, such as shameful dust gathering on organ pipes in a far off church. The female characters try to convince him to leave by suggesting that his particular talents might be in demand in some far off land. For example, he might need to check and see whether or not the Grand Turk's turban is on straight. Their ruse, however, does not convince him, and Paz eventually recruits two mute strong men, Conocimiento Propio and Propio Desprecio, to remove the ranting Celso from the stage, thus allowing her, Alma, and Sinceridad, and therefore the audience, as well, respite from his ridiculous antics.

Although not the main focus of this chapter, I will provide a short summary of Sor Marcela's other two spiritual colloquies. Even though they do not feature the character of Alma in the same way as the four plays previously discussed, they certainly showcase the playwright's tremendous talent and are worth mentioning here. In the first, *Del Nacimiento*, Piedad helps Devoción to understand the mystery of Christ's birth by accompanying her to the manger. Contemplación, in the form of a shepherdess, appears when the other characters speak of God. The three women meet up with Regocijo along the way, who tells the Christmas story in a rather long-winded and roundabout way.⁸ The

⁸ Sor Marcela's biographer notes that the playwright often wrote with an "estilo pastoral" in which "hacían salir a los labios altísimos conceptos aunque en lenguaje rústico" (65), as is the case with Regocijo.

characters then take turns presenting arguments in a rhetorical battle meant to discover whose planned actions of worship will most please the Christ child. Contemplación's declaration of love elicits cries of "¡Víctor, Víctor!" (673) from Regocijo, and the other characters agree with his evaluation. Together they arrive at the manger and prostrate themselves before it, asking the Christ child for his love, and asking Mary and Joseph to intercede on their behalf.

Unlike *Del nacimiento*, the spiritual colloquy *Santísimo Sacramento* does include the character Alma. As the play opens, Pureza encourages Alma to look her best for the "festivo día" (7), which references the *sacramento* mentioned in the title. Sor Marcela makes it clear that Alma will soon be a nun by having Pureza use the future subjunctive to state that she will be "ligada / por los votos religiosos" (96-97). Fervor reinforces this idea when he talks of the life of Christ and references him as the "enamorado del Alma" (175). Both Pureza and Fervor then warn Alma about a servant named Negligencia, who turns out to be a very subtle nemesis. For example, she does not tell Alma not to comply with her responsibilities. Instead, she instructs Alma "que no se mate" (246) in her penitence, and, "que no salga tan de mañana / de la cama" (255-56). Although her calls for "moderación y templanza" (841) seem prudent, Negligencia's influence could potentially keep Alma from being prepared for the exquisite banquet that is Communion. Fortunately for the protagonist, "el Fervor / tiene a Negligencia atada" (959-60), which then allows for the union of Christ with the soul.

Although these last two plays do not fit into Smith's grouping, Sor Marcela's *coloquios espirituales* in general bring to the forefront and challenge certain early modern ideas about gender and the roles assigned to both women and men. It is imperative for the

modern reader to be aware of these concepts of gender in order to understand exactly how Sor Marcela challenged them through her theater. In Elizabeth Rhodes's intriguing and insightful study on gender and the monstrous in *El burlador de Sevilla*, she argues that the character of Don Juan possesses and displays many traditionally feminine characteristics, thus demonstrating his characterization as monstrous within the *comedia* tradition. In order to do so, Rhodes takes special note of attributes commonly assigned, respectively, to both men and women in early modern Spain. In her article, she references Sebastián de Covarrubias's *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, which defines the word *varón* as "hombre de juicio, razón y discurso, y de de buena conciencia" (195) in order to create a stark contrast with qualities considered specific to the feminine. Covarrubias defines the *mala mujer* as "tormento de la casa, naufragio del hombre, embaraço del sosiego, cautiverio de la vida, daño continuo, guerra voluntaria, fiera domestica, disfraçado veneno, y mal necesario" (818). His perspective on the matter of gender difference provides us with a unique insight into the cultural sensitivities and the collective imagination of Spain's early modern society. In order to illustrate "women's essential instability and superficiality" (Rhodes 268), Covarrubias metaphorically compares her to a ship easily tossed about by every wave, thus defining her as inherently unstable and directionless. Rhodes also cites Hernando de Soto, who likewise casts aspersions on womankind, likening women to the beautiful but extremely poisonous oleander (268), clearly as a way of warning men to look but not touch.

According to Constance Jordan's study on Renaissance feminism, philosophers perceived human nature as androgynous to a certain extent. A person was always recognized as being biologically male or female, but one could classify behavior as either

feminine or masculine (8). Attributes such as mercy or temperance were inherently feminine, while those such as reason or bravery were clearly masculine (Soufas 42). Most egalitarian-minded philosophers believed that both men and women, in order to be truly virtuous, should develop masculine, and some feminine, characteristics. On the other hand, those less sympathetic early modern thinkers voiced their opinions about gender as well. Basing their ideas on Aristotle's view of women as biologically deficient beings, they believed that sexual difference undoubtedly translated into social difference.

Authors such as Fray Luis de León insisted that women are naturally inclined to vices such as idleness. In his *La perfecta casada*, he praises the hypothetical woman of virtue, but with a caveat. He explains "lo que aqui decimos muger de valor . . . pudieramos decir muger varonil" (30-31). Fray Luis then goes on to define the term *varonil*: "quiere decir virtud de ánimo, y fortaleza de corazon, industria, y riquezas, y poder, y aventajamiento; y finalmente, un ser perfecto y cabal en aquellas cosas, á quien esta palabra se aplica" (31). If these characteristics are inherently masculine, then their opposites must be inherently feminine. In other words, women, who are naturally cowardly, lazy, and imperfect, must become more like men, who are naturally brave, industrious, and faultless.

Generally speaking, early modern ideas about gender prove themselves to be strictly dichotomous and oppositional, which is why male writers such as Covarrubias and de Soto do not, and perhaps cannot, define gender on its own terms, but solely in relation to its opposite. They approach women not directly, but rather metaphorically and relationally. They seem to indicate, in other words, that we cannot know what a woman *is*, but we can explain what she is *like* and what she is *not*. Hence, a woman can only be a

man's converse and exists solely in opposition to him. She represents inconsistency rather than constancy, treachery rather than truthfulness, and hysteria rather than rationality. For each male strength, she possesses a corresponding female weakness. While a man is "la cordura, y el valor, y el seso, y el maestro, y todo el buen exemplo de su casa y familia" (León 63), "la flaqueza y el poco saber, y el menudo ánimo" make up a woman's nature (León 64). The *mujer varonil*, then, must embody or espouse virtues and characteristics traditionally assigned to her male counterpart, such as "juicio, razón y discurso" (Covarrubias 952), in order to successfully accomplish the task at hand.

In the *comedia*, the tremendously popular, and oftentimes scandalizing, presentation of the *mujer varonil* utilized male costuming as the clearest and most crowd-pleasing indicator of a character's gender bending, as indicated by Lope de Vega in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*. As Lope explains, "Las damas no desdigan de su nombre, / y, si mudaren traje, sea de modo / que pueda perdonarse, porque suele / el disfraz varonil agradar mucho" (280-83). In other words, the audience members found female cross-dressing quite pleasing, all the more reason for Lope to please the *vulgo* by including the trope in his works. In his somewhat dated article on cross-dressing women in the *comedia*, B. B. Ashcom noted the practicality of the *mujer varonil* character. He argues that due to the immediacy of the dramatist's genre, dramaturgic considerations served as the primary motivation for playwrights to include this theatrical device. Ashcom notes simply that "the theme of 'la mujer vestida de hombre' was employed because it was good theater" (50). McKendrick takes a more in-depth look at the *mujer varonil* trope, moving beyond the cross-dressed woman and creating categories in order to understand the phenomenon in a more comprehensive manner. According to

McKendrick, the *mujer varonil* can fall under the categories of the *bandolera*, the *mujer esquiva*, the amazon, the leader, the warrior, the scholar, the career woman, the *bella cazadora*, and the avenger. Her exhaustive study clearly indicates that early modern playwrights employed this theatrical trope not simply because it was good theater, but also because it was an accurate reflection of social realities, as well as an expression of male anxieties about the implications of setting aside cultural gender norms and expectations.

In her introduction, McKendrick pointedly explains that in Golden Age drama, the term *mujer varonil* is one of praise, not derision, and defines the term as a “woman who is ‘masculine’ not only in her dress but also in her acts, her speech or even her whole attitude of mind” (x). In simpler terms, she is a woman who has “departed from the feminine norm” (43). For the majority of early modern playwrights, however, only “women who depart from the norm in an admirable, positive or at least forgivable way, are *varoniles*; those who do so in a totally reprehensible way are just wicked women” (62). The authors of *comedias* often show their admiration for women who behave more like men, allowing them to successfully navigate the masculine realm in all aspects, from sword fighting to wooing other *damas*. However, the typical resolution to the *comedia*, in which all the main characters are neatly paired off and engaged to marry, ensures that these *mujeres varoniles* return to their traditional, acceptable, feminine role as subservient wives to their dominant husbands. In classic carnivalesque fashion, the playwrights allowed these female characters to temporarily infiltrate a sector of society that is customarily closed to them, only to force them to resume their previous position once proper order is restored. Even women playwrights such as Ana Caro, Ángela de

Azevedo, and María de Zayas, whose female characters are impressively more successful at masculine tasks than their male counterparts, must relinquish their temporary *varonil* persona and return to a more socially acceptable role at the conclusion of the play. For example, Leonor, in *Valor, agravio y mujer*, and Lisarda, in *El muerto disimulado*, each take on a masculine persona only to revert to a feminine one in order to marry once the dramatic action concludes. McKendrick points out that the outcome of plays such as these “is a feminism of a different and more limited sort: liberal in important respects, but ultimately conservative” (105). Sor Marcela’s *coloquios espirituales*, on the other hand, produce a kind of feminism that pushes the boundaries of early modern gender norms a bit further.

In the *comedia* tradition, assuming a male identity by donning male clothing is usually essential for any *mujer varonil* character. Although we may perhaps associate this trope first and foremost with cross-dressing, this type of masculine costuming most likely would not have been permitted in theatrical productions in the Spanish convent,⁹ despite the freedom afforded by an all-female audience. Also, in the case of Sor Marcela’s work, Alma’s evolution from weak-willed woman to *mujer varonil* is a very gradual one in comparison with the instantaneous transformations that often occur on the *comedia* stage. Because of this gradual change and due to the allegorical nature of the play, Alma does not require any sort of masculine dress to accomplish her goal. She does not rely principally on costuming to guide the understanding of the audience. Consequently, the spectators would only have identified Alma as a *varonil* character through her employ of ‘masculine’ merits, as expressed through both dialogue and dramatic action.

⁹ In this aspect, Spanish convent theatre differs greatly from Italian convent theatre. According to Elissa B. Weaver’s study, Italian nuns regularly staged plays with secular themes (53) and even wore male costumes to enhance their productions (83).

Since Sor Marcela does not designate Alma as a *mujer varonil* from the outset, she initially allows her protagonist to display many of the traditional negative ‘feminine’ traits outlined by Covarrubias. At the beginning of the first colloquy, *La muerte del Apetito*, we find Alma complaining about the rigorous nature of the lifestyle that Mortificación tries to impose upon her, stating that although “bien deseo la virtud, / su dificultad me ahoga” (9-10). Through dialogue such as this, she proves that she unfortunately possesses many ‘feminine’ weaknesses, such as a lack of dedication to the ideals of virtue, inconsistency in her declared devotion to Mortificación, and a rather unbecoming narcissism, as revealed in her threat to align herself with her “vecina Vanidad,” which “siempre me ofrece su casa, / su lado, su mesa y más” (43-45). In fact, she is so disinclined to follow Mortificación’s lead that she blithely commands her: “vete a un convento descalzo” (59). Alma complains about the harsh requirements of this virtue, and laments, “Ya me tiene muy cansada, / amiga, tu condición” and indicates that her suggestion of ingressión into a discalced convent would be best, since “allí seras admitida, muy regalada y servida / de quien tiene obligación de sufrir tu condición” (56-63). This humorous and clearly self-referential moment must have served as a reminder to the audience of the often severe requirements of their order. Perhaps the audience members would have commiserated with both Alma and Mortificación as they reflected on their own past misgivings when faced with a life of self-denial and their past and ongoing fight against desire and appetite.

After attempting to get rid of Mortificación, Alma goes on to lament Apetito’s absence, while her description of him as being “no . . . mozuelo cobarde,” but rather “valiente como un Cid” (84-85), helps shape his characterization as a worldly *galán* who

brashly attempts to seduce her. This characterization may have resulted from an incident in the author's own life. Sor Marcela's cousin once posed as a suitor to test her devotion to convent life, and in response, the playwright "Resistió *varonilmente* a sus sus persuaciones como quien había escogido inmortal esposo desde sus primeros años"¹⁰ (Smith, *El convento* 82-84; my emphasis). Unlike Sor Marcela, Alma's 'feminine' characteristics allow her to be easily influenced by *Apetito*, who unabashedly and continually reminds both his fellow characters and the audience members of his own insatiable hunger for all things physical, especially food. Contrastingly, *Mortificación* threatens to kill *Apetito* with her own hands, thereby presenting herself as the *varonil* example *par excellence* of what Alma should become. As the two women appear in juxtaposition to one another, we see that Alma is weak, carnal, capricious, and somewhat lazy, whereas *Mortificación* is strong, spiritual, judicious, and does not shy away from the rigors of a religious life.

In a remarkable twist of characterization, *Apetito*, although presented as a *galán* figure, behaves much more like the 'feminine' Alma than like the 'masculine' *Mortificación*. Just as Rhodes depicts Don Juan as a monstrous hybrid possessing both male and female characteristics, *Apetito* also "performs negative cultural assignments of Woman" (267). However, quite unlike Rhodes's analysis of the Don Juan character, *Apetito* seems to exclusively display feminine characteristics, such as when he cries at the thought of being killed by the female trio, revels in his weak-willed nature, or displays a deep-seated instability by rapidly alternating from one emotion to the next. He is increasingly rendered powerless by the growing power and self-assuredness of Alma

¹⁰ Upon being rejected by Sor Marcela, her pretend suitor made it clear that his intentions were insincere, and explained that if she had agreed to run away from the convent with him, he had every intention of murdering her as punishment for her lack of loyalty to the vows she had taken.

until the moment he is killed by Mortificación's sword, a clearly phallic symbol normally possessed solely by male characters. While his descent into the 'feminine' leads to his eventual demise, Alma's ascent into the 'masculine' directs her towards the celestial and opens up the possibility of salvation.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing factors in Alma's transition from 'feminine' to 'masculine' is the participation of other female characters. This community of women and the solidarity it creates is what actually allows Alma her triumph over *Apetito*, temporary though it proves to be. Truly, the sense of community formed between these female characters is one of the most striking features of this play. In her article on women's solidarity, Mercedes Maroto Camino notes the importance of this trope in the drama of both *María de Zayas* and *Ana Caro*. She points out that this outward manifestation of female friendship was not only a literary device, but also a social reality due to the demands of the Spanish honor code, which allowed for and even encouraged the marginalization and repression of women. Maroto Camino argues that this solidarity serves to combat the "progressive weakening of female will" and to fight against the tactics "deployed to subjugate and paralyze women" (3). Just as female friendship and solidarity is necessary in *Zayas* and *Caro*, the case of Sor Marcela's *coloquios espirituales* is no different. The female characters, Mortificación and Desnudez, form an unbreakable bond of solidarity with Alma within a feminine society, and only through this bond do they overcome the evil designs of *Apetito*. The creation of such a felicitous and loyal group of women is not, however, an uncomplicated endeavor, whether in the context of the play or within the convent walls. As Doreen Massey points out, "It is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed, too" (6). In

other words, the physical space of the convent, mirrored in these plays, directly influences the bonds of female friendship. Relationships within the cloister distinguished themselves from those that occurred *extramuros*.

Thus, Sor Marcela illustrates and emphasizes that this desired sense of community does not occur naturally, but rather must be cultivated with love and patience. We can imagine that this rang true for the nuns in attendance, who knew full well the difficulties of creating bonds of friendship and solidarity among a group of cloistered women. For example, Sor Marcela's biography tells of an incident in which one of the other nuns yelled at her and spit in her face in a jealous rage. Her biographer notes that "no dejó de tener mucho que padecer de las mismas monjas, pero jamás se quejó de ninguna" (Smith, *El convento* 87). Notwithstanding difficulties such as these, the playwright makes it clear that the nuns must unite if they wish to defeat a common enemy. Only after much patience, explication, and persuasion does Mortificación convince Alma of the dangers of succumbing to her appetite and the necessity of joining together in order to defeat him. This communal approach to virtue appears in stark contrast to male-authored *autos*. Smith compares Sor Marcela's play to traditional autos written by her male contemporaries, and explains:

The basic antithesis has changed: Appetite is a solitary figure, rather than accompanied. He attacks a feminine figure, *Alma*, rather than Man/Reason. And, the Soul does not struggle alone but is actively accompanied by the company of three Virtues comprising a trio of feminine nouns. While Man with his reason as protagonist was sufficient unto himself to do battle in the male-authored *autos*, Sor Marcela's Soul has the aid of a feminine collective. ("The Female Trinity" 241-42)

In this way, Sor Marcela deftly emphasizes the absolute necessity of the creation of a close-knit and loving society of women, and encourages her sisters to follow suit within their own community.

Another advantage of this “feminine collective” is the fact that there is safety in numbers, against both spiritual and physical temptation. Before the apparition of Desnudez and in the midst of Alma’s conversion process, *Apetito* seems merely annoyed at *Mortificación*’s constant pressure, imploring “Madre, vuelva a su quietud / y déjenos, por su vida” (149-50). However, when *Mortificación* begins to speak to Alma about killing *Apetito*, he reveals his anxiety about the growing solidarity between them, which leads him to plead with Alma, “Esta mujer me atormenta, / quieres, Alma, despedilla?” (188-89). In a last-ditch effort to keep the two women apart, he angrily directs himself to *Mortificación*, boldly stating, “No me acabe y me consuma; / váyase a roer sus santos, / que al Alma he de regalar” (319-21). When *Desnudez* appears later on, she indicates that she arrived as soon as she could and that her obligation to Alma, as a member of a shared female society, takes precedence over all other responsibilities and obligations (750-54).

Precisely because of her rigorous nature, which challenges even *Mortificación*, *Desnudez* proves herself the most formidable opponent to *Apetito*’s wily ways. As *Desnudez* gears up to deliver a highly motivational speech to the beleaguered Alma, *Apetito* tries to dissuade her from doing so by claiming “no tienes aquí concurso / para hacer ese sermón , / que somos aquí muy pocos / y estamos mal avenidos después que tú entraste acá” (801-05). When *Desnudez* insists on delivering her speech, Alma mockingly points out to her that their nemesis is so upset that he has begun to cry, either from rage or fear. Either way, *Apetito* is clearly distressed by the added power that

Desnudez brings to the feminine community that has banded together against him. He fully comprehends that while he might defeat Alma if she is left to her own devices, he is definitely no match for a sisterhood devoted to his eventual destruction.

Upon having demonstrated to the members of her audience exactly how to vanquish *Apetito*, Sor Marcela moves on to conquer another dilemma facing her and the other sisters in the convent. In *La estimación de la religión*, the author deals with the difficulty of distinguishing truth from lies, and employs a well-established literary tradition in order to do so. In this play, Alma presides in her home populated by her two maidservants, one of which displays a faithful nature, and one of which proves to be quite treacherous. Possibly taking inspiration from both Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* and the *comedia* tradition, Sor Marcela innovates her own version of the celestinesque *tercera* character. Similar to her sneaky predecessors, Mentira works diligently and craftily to gain Alma's trust in order to serve her own purpose, regardless of the damage her mistress will undoubtedly suffer as a consequence. As Verdad warns Alma, "es su condición mudable, / es todo su trato doble . . . aborrece la amistad / que se funda en la virtud" (52-53, 55-56). In fact, Mentira reveals her diabolical plotting in an aside. Referencing the close knit relationship between Alma and Verdad, she poses the question, "Qué hare para que las dos / riñan y se aparten luego? / Quiero emprender un gran fuego / de Discordia y pesadumbre; / ¿no es aquésta la costumbre / heredada de mi padre / el Demonio?" (177-83). Not only does this villainous character express her desire to sow discord among the other women, but, more importantly, admits that this is a masculine tactic that she can use to break up virtuous female friendship. This devious desire to drive them apart was bequeathed her by not just any male figure, but by the

devil himself. Mentira employs this tactic because she, like her father, understands that she cannot succeed unless Alma and Verdad's relationship fails. This unity proves to be Mentira's Achilles's heel. Thus we see once more the importance of positive female camaraderie.

Although Sor Marcela praises feminine solidarity and clearly deems it essential in her world, she also warns against taking it too far, since not all women can be trusted. For example, Alma soon proves to be too trusting and compassionate for her own good. She pleads with Verdad to forgive her friend Mentira, arguing "no puedo obedecer / en echarla, como quieres. / Mira que *somos mujeres* / para dolernos de aquésta" (389-92; my emphasis). Surprisingly, Verdad answers, "Eso no tiene respuesta, / y así no te la daré" (393-94). Even Truth, naturally opposed to Lies and attempting to act in her friend's best interest, defers to Alma when she invokes female solidarity. Verdad cannot deny that loyalty is paramount in female friendship. This mistake eventually results in a near crisis as Mentira continues to play on Alma's compassion in order to distance her from Verdad. For example, Mentira complains to Alma that Verdad has, in the past, attempted to kill her dearest family members, who have names such as Traición, Enredo, Engaño, and Sinrazón. Alma admits that she is incapable of turning a deaf ear to Mentira's cries when she laments to Verdad, "No tengo entrañas de roble, / sus razones me movieron, / sus quejas me enternecieron / y sus lágrimas mudaron" (344-47). Mentira takes advantage of Alma's sympathy in order to gain entrance to her home for the character Mundo. Although Alma at this point already possesses certain 'masculine' virtues, her overriding 'feminine' weaknesses threaten to place her directly in harm's way.

Mentira continues her manipulation with an inaccurate description of Mundo as a handsome, brave, rich gentleman. This convinces Alma to let down her guard, despite Verdad's protestation that he is, in truth, nothing more than an ugly, miserable, old man. Sor Marcela draws on the Spanish code of honor in order to emphasize the moral and physical danger caused by Mundo's presence in Alma's house, just as the presence of a *galán* in the house of a *dama* could permanently damage her reputation, thereby seriously endangering her future prospects, and even possibly putting her life at risk. This self-referential scene alludes to the types of situations that may have encouraged, or perhaps compelled, the nuns to enter the confines of the convent. For example, Sor Marcela's illegitimacy would surely have kept her from entering into a favorable marriage contract, which seems to have been one of the principal reasons she entered the convent at such a young age. In her case as well as in Alma's, men's actions negatively affect the lives of women, who are reduced to being acted upon as objects rather than acting independently as subjects.

In the next colloquy in the series, *La estimación de la religión*, Sor Marcela continues to remind her fellow nuns of the negative male influence they were subjected to outside the convent walls, while warning them once more against false female friendship, which often serves male desires. This warning works to reinforce their intent to become brides of Christ, especially since many of the nuns may not have chosen the monastic life of their own volition. McKendrick points out that "a vow of chastity can . . . become a more effective means of social emancipation than marriage itself" (138), while Teresa Soufas agrees, stating that "the celibate monastic life offered women avenues for their agency and escape from the physical and intellectual control exercised over them in

secular life” (93). Within the convent walls, and thereby relatively free from controlling male influence, these socially emancipated women could and did develop talents and strengths that might otherwise lay dormant. Although Michel de Certeau’s assertion that power is inherent in physical places (38), such as the convent, rings true, the nuns were able to exercise their particular abilities in order to undermine that power by destabilizing traditional notions of gender. Sor Marcela turns gender norms on their ear by means of the characterization of Mundo and the description of his house. Mundo intends to tempt Alma by explaining that an abundance of curtains, maidservants, chairs, beds, coaches, paintings, jewels, tapestries, music, *saraos*, and *comedias* populate his house, since, as he points out, “todos cuantos deleites / la imaginación alcanza / a desear, yo los tengo / muy sin límite ni tasa” (969-72). Excess, like inconstancy and weakness, was an attribute traditionally ascribed to women, but in this play Sor Marcela presents yet another *galán* character that, like *Apetito*, displays negative ‘feminine’ characteristics. Meanwhile, Alma, as a *dama*, must reject his tempting invitation to overindulge. Mundo’s self-declared ‘feminine’ intemperance allows Alma the unique opportunity to develop ‘masculine’ temperance.

Alma must also ignore the accepted patriarchal concept of man as the seat of reason. In order to be spiritually successful, she must expand upon the idea that “la perfeccion del hombre, en qualquier estado suyo, consiste principalmente en el bien obrar” (León 38-39). Sor Marcela does this by empowering her female audience members to usurp the traditionally male position as the doer of good deeds. As in *La muerte del apetito*, Alma can once again rely on strong female characters for help and support as she struggles to escape the ways of the world. The character of Religión,

representing specifically religious vocation, appears as Mundo's foil and as a true and loyal friend to Verdad. Before Religión appears onstage, Verdad describes her in these terms: "tal discreción, tal agrado, / santamente cariciosa, / y con divino agasajo" (1086-89). Just as Mundo has offered Alma his sumptuous and excessive pleasure palace, Religión's simple and humble abode is also open to her, in order for her to "estar segura / del Mundo y de sus engaños" (1129-30). Thus referencing the protection inherent in the convent, Sor Marcela utilizes Religión as a mouthpiece to express her own feelings about religious cloistered life.

Ingression into this hallowed abode, however, is neither automatic nor undemanding. To begin with, Religión offers a laundry list of virtues that one must possess before entering her "palacio" (1162). The candidates must have "oídos desocupados, / corazón limpio y atento, / ojos despiertos y claros" (1156-58) and be able to control their passions through brave and valiant efforts. In other words, in order to be worthy to enter the convent, they must be the opposite of Mundo in all things. As she did with *Apetito*, Sor Marcela once again assigns traditionally masculine characteristics, such as valor and nobleness, to her female characters, while her male villain indulges in 'feminine' vices, such as excess. Not only does Religión provide an additional model of behavior for the nuns in attendance, but she also praises the equality and solidarity of cloistered societies. In the convent, in theory, at least, a "grande igualdad" (1227) reigns, making economic and social status a moot point, although this may have been a more prescriptive than descriptive take on convent life, since every space "embodies and implies particular social relations" (Lefebvre 83). As Soufas argues when exploring the use of authority in dramatic texts by early modern Spanish women writers, women

conceive of authority as “communal contexts of caring and connectedness that depend on interaction and mutual communication and understanding” (40). In other words, authority for Sor Marcela is horizontal rather than vertical. Such a horizontal, feminine authority could never exist in Mundo’s abode, where he has clearly placed himself at the head of a strictly patriarchal domestic hierarchy.

Notwithstanding Religión’s high praise for conventual life, Sor Marcela honestly reveals the difficulties inherent in such a lifestyle. Mentira’s description of the demanding nature of an *intramuros* existence allows the playwright to criticize or complain indirectly about hardships. Mentira warns Alma that she will never again be able to act according to her own will. Instead, she will suffer thirst and hunger, and, for all intents and purposes, will live like a slave. By placing this discourse in the mouth of a villainous character, Sor Marcela distances herself from the critique, perhaps for fear of the Inquisition, while creating a self-conscious moment for the nun spectators. She goes on to soften this criticism of monastic life through Alma’s response, which recognizes Mentira’s speech as a gross exaggeration and insists on the importance of choosing a religious rather than a worldly existence, despite Verdad’s admission that the nuns’ life is indeed challenging, but rewarding nonetheless. Religión assures Alma, “guardarás una regla / de primitivo rigor, / tan süave y tan discreta, / que siendo en extremo dulce, / es en extremo perfecta” (1441-45), and Alma, accompanied by Verdad, enters Religión’s home, thereby signaling the soul’s ingress into the convent.

The third colloquy, *De virtudes*, occurs after Alma has taken her vows as a bride of Christ, and begins *in medias res* as Tibieza tries to convince Alma that being Oración’s friend is much too demanding. As in the previous colloquy, Sor Marcela creates a

negative female character that does her best to undermine a beneficial female friendship. Although she initially appears rather benign, Tibieza quickly reveals herself to be whiny, needy, mocking, and rude. In other words, she is the antithesis of what Alma is in the process of becoming. In contrast to the previous two colloquies, Alma's nemesis in this play does not present her with a clear-cut choice between good and evil, but rather challenges her level of commitment to the monastic life she has chosen. This indicates just how *varonil* Alma must be, since her encounter with Tibieza requires her to exercise "juizio, razon, y discurso" in order to shore herself up against her own laxity or lack of discipline. Sor Marcela also reinforces what Alma has already learned about friendship; specifically, female friendship. In this regard, this play builds on its predecessors, which clearly emphasized both the absolute necessity of positive female friendship and the importance of solidarity within those friendships, as Alma illustrates when she explains to Tibieza, "sientes mal a la Oración / a quien estimo y venero, / y, por ella, no te quiero, / que es tu mortal enemiga" (51-54). It is not as simple as choosing women over men. Rather, the protagonist must carefully choose her associates regardless of gender, since female friends can prove as treacherous as their male counterparts.

By characterizing Tibieza as dangerous and negative in this particular colloquy, Sor Marcela introduces new subtleties into Alma's decision-making process. Indeed, she presents the protagonist with the same challenges that the audience members face in their daily lives. They, like Alma, must not only choose between good and evil, but also between full and partial devotion to the cloistered life to which they have committed themselves. In point of fact, Tibieza attacks a full commitment to this lifestyle, which cuts the nuns off from the outside world, both physically and mentally, when she pleads

with Alma, “Deja ya tanta clausura / de potencias y sentidos, / que parece que oprimidos / los tienes en una prensa” (156-61). Oración helps Alma realize, however, that any relaxation of morals or devotion on her part would only lead to “una vida miserable” (240). She can never let her guard down. The rigors of her commitment leave no room for any ‘feminine’ weakness.

Despite this affirmation, Sor Marcela appears to undermine her intention to create a strong female protagonist when Oración tells Alma, “en fin, has sido mujer / y, como mujer, mudable” (241-242). As Smith and Sabat de Rivers point out, the playwright “repites lugares comunes con respecto a la mujer – que es mudable, débil, caprichosa y cambia de opinión fácilmente.” Sor Marcela utilizes these commonly held beliefs, however, because she intends to “hacer de Alma ejemplo de lo contrario: una mujer fuerte y constante” (162). Once again, the spectator observes a developing, changing, growing Alma who becomes more *varonil* with every correct decision. As always, female solidarity helps her to do so, since Oración acts as mediator between her and Christ, the bridegroom. Only by cleaving unto Oración, and subsequently ignoring the subtle temptations and enticing of Tibieza, will Alma successfully please her new celestial spouse.

As we read these plays, it is tempting to imagine Sor Marcela and her sisters-in-arms as the contented inhabitants of their own idyllic ‘City of Ladies,’ where they are free to eschew the demands of the patriarchy. Nevertheless, we must recognize the presence of a male hierarchy that overrides the horizontal authority expressed through female solidarity. Although the nuns enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy within the convent walls, they were most definitely always aware of the presence of an

overwhelming patriarchal authority that made itself known in the forms of confessors, inquisitors, bishops, and the like. In other words, they were “territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power” (Soja 87). In her colloquies, Sor Marcela represents ideal male authority through Christ; the constant and unseen male character. The nuns’ bridegroom is ever present in these colloquies, since Sor Marcela’s female characters desire above all to please him, placate him, or earn a place in his presence after their mortal existence. Nonetheless, she never creates any other male characters, secular or ecclesiastical, that must be obeyed. The only male figure able to exercise influence over the female characters in her drama is a divine one. This fact is significant, taking into account the ecclesiastical world in which the author lived.

Besides excluding human male authority from her works, Sor Marcela also challenges the patriarchy through the inclusion of the Catholic mystic tradition, which is subtly present here. Mujica explains that ecclesiastical authorities considered this type of spirituality to be very dangerous, since it seemed to “fomentar una relación directa entre el individuo y Dios sin la intervención de la Iglesia” (*Women Writers* 3). At one point in the play, Alma asks if Oración “se ha arrobado” (363) which, according to Smith and Sabat de Rivers, refers to condition of being “fuera de sí” (167), or experiencing a sort of spiritual ecstasy associated with an intimate union with God. The idea that the female characters in the play could have a direct relationship with deity without the intercession of male leaders flies in the very face of the patriarchal organization of the Catholic Church. If Alma is to follow Oración’s example, then she, too, could experience just such a mystical union, a fascinating insinuation considering she is a metaphorical representative of the nuns participating in and observing the production. Therefore, Alma

is not portrayed as a weak-willed daughter of Eve, whose transgressions keep her from the divine, but rather a strong mystical figure whose gender does not exclude her from intimate communication with a divine being.

Another intriguing moment in the play occurs towards the end, as the character of Amor, representative of the love of Christ and, metonymically, Christ himself, praises Mary, the “celestial señora” (648), and her virtues. Thus we see that Sor Marcela completely excludes the traditional portrayal of Eve as an example of negative comportment, and instead upholds a singularly positive female figure as the ultimate exemplar. Oración advises Alma, and by extension the nuns, by saying “imítala en sus virtudes” (658). In order to attain salvation, Alma must surround herself with positive female friends upon whom she can rely, such as Humildad, Pobreza, Abstinencia, Modestia, Oración, Perseverancia, Resignación, Desnudez, and Obediencia. She should not exclude male figures, however, as noted by the presence of Silencio in Amor’s list of those whom she should exemplify. Poor Silencio is quite outnumbered, likely indicating that while some male figures are to be followed, Alma is safest in the company of other righteous women. Once Alma has proven her faithful and *varonil* nature to the bridegroom, Amor lovingly declares, “Ven, Alma mía, y haré / que descanses en mis brazos” (779-780). She then dedicates herself to His service, and expresses the immense happiness that doing so brings.

Although Alma’s progress throughout the course of the colloquies thus far is impressive, she does not complete her transformation into a *mujer varonil* character until the fourth play in the set, *El celo indiscreto*. Here, Sor Marcela introduces yet another male antagonist and further complicates Alma’s quest for piety. As in *De virtudes*, the

protagonist does not face a simple choice between good and evil, but rather must grapple once more with her level of devotion. Whereas previously Alma was to shun laxity in her commitment to monastic life, now she must steer clear of overzealousness that will undoubtedly drive her to extremes. In this allegory, Sor Marcela challenges her audience members to strike an acceptable balance between the two. Initially, Alma perceives Celo as a saint because of “lo mucho que le han seguido / y admitido sus consejos / los más doctos, los más viejos / que más tardan de virtud” (52-55). It is important to note that Alma does not look to ‘las más doctas’ or ‘las más viejas’ as examples. The spectator may interpret this careful choice of language to mean that despite the positions of vertical authority held by ecclesiastical leaders within the patriarchy of the church, the nuns should avoid certain characteristics encouraged or exemplified by those in power. As Smith points out, Sor Marcela used the characters in her plays to decry “moral laxness at the highest levels of Church and State” (“The Female Trinity” 247). Although these men possess a certain level of status and influence, their female subordinates should not blindly follow their lead. In other words, Sor Marcela reiterates the message relayed by her use of the mystic tradition – each woman in attendance is responsible for and can achieve her own union with God without the help of male intercessories. In fact, these very ecclesiastical authorities may even lead her astray and keep her from the divine bridegroom.

In an effort to help Alma realize this, and because Celo’s self-righteousness seems to blind her, Paz explains that Celo Indiscreto poses a threat to the protagonist’s happiness. She warns, “tan triste y inútil vida / bien se puede comparar / con las que suelen pasar / los soberbios invidiosos / que todos se hacen odiosos / y a todos cansan y

ofenden, / y los aborrecen todos” (99-105). Alma should enthusiastically embrace the vows she has taken, but must reject any overzealousness. Sor Marcela once again invokes the need for female solidarity and horizontal authority as Paz points out that “solo conmigo podrás / llegar al fin que pretendes” (114-15). She does not say that Alma must go through her to reach her goal, nor dogmatically emulate her, but rather that Alma will achieve her desires alongside Paz. The image Sor Marcela summons is one of two women walking together, side by side, towards a common end.

Nonetheless, this does not indicate that the playwright had forgotten her previous warning about dangerous female friendships. In this colloquy, she introduces Sinceridad, an extremely well meaning, but often misguided, character. As she has done with the antagonist Celo, Sor Marcela continues to place Alma in ever more challenging situations, and perhaps her most difficult appears in the form of Sinceridad. Alma’s choice is not between a good friend who will lead her down the right path and a false one bent on furthering her own purposes. Instead, the protagonist must discover how to deal with a true friend who is, unfortunately, rather ingenuous and injudicious. As soon as she steps foot on stage, Sinceridad naively describes Celo to Alma in this way; “¡Qué galán! ¡Qué airoso pisa! / Es el viejo muy brñoso” (156-57). She goes on to opine “Es su ingenio muy capaz, / y dicen que entiende mucho / de espíritus y virtudes, / con grande luz y destreza, / y que, si a reñir empieza, / que lo sabe proseguir” (166-71). Sinceridad soon proves to be Celo’s unwitting accomplice because of her inability to discern between appropriate devotion and that which is carried to extremes. It is precisely her lack of that ‘masculine’ virtue of *juicio* that makes her vulnerable.

With Paz as her guide and the attributes of judgment and reason at her disposal, Alma begins to see Celo for what he truly is. His increasingly erratic actions and speech both separate him from the other characters and serve as a mirror for the nuns to examine, and perhaps put in check, their own level of devotion. Using Sinceridad as a mouthpiece and drawing on the biblical metaphor of the beam and the mote, Sor Marcela warns, “tú quieres saberlo todo, / reñir y reprehender, / ajenos delitos ver / y nunca mirar los tuyos / más que si inculpable fueras” (240-44). Filtering her admonition through her characters allows the playwright to indirectly call her sisters-in-arms to repentance if they find themselves following Celo’s extreme example too closely.

Another significant element of this play is the juxtaposition of interior devotion with exterior signs of obedience. Celo’s constant fault finding with those around him reminds us of Fray Luis de León’s negative portrayal of the idle married woman. He explains,

Forzado es que, si no trata de sus oficios, emplee su vida, en los oficios ajenos: y que dé en ser ventanera, visitadora, callejera, amiga de fiestas, enemiga de su rincón, de su casa olvidada, y de las casas ajenas curiosa, pesquisidora de quanto pasa, y aun de lo que no pasa inventora, parlera, y chismosa, de pleytos revolvedora, jugadora también, y dada del todo a la conversacion y al palacio, con lo demás, que por ordinaria consequência se sigue, y se calla aqui ahora, por ser cosa manifiesta y notoria. (110)

Just as the idle woman occupies her time by gossiping and spying, Celo displays the same negative characteristics once widely thought to be inherent in women. He, like the hypothetical woman in Fray Luis’s treatise, takes it upon himself to know “las casas ajenas” and to correct others’ faults. Sor Marcela juxtaposes Celo’s negative, and assumedly feminine, attributes with Paz’s calm, measured demeanor. As Schlau and Arenal point out, “Paz articulates a Teresian concern: that imprudent or immoderate

behavior – excess of fervor, fasting, and flagellation – not tip religious men and women into madness” (234-35). They also astutely note that Sor Marcela associates Celo with madness, an infirmity traditionally ascribed to women as hysteria, a disorder thought to be caused by a wandering uterus. Celo slowly but surely descends further into his insanity as reality slips away from him. For example, at one point he even decries “una muy gran maldad” (715), which is that “unos órganos muy lindos / que había para las fiestas, / estaban llenos de polvo / y sin ninguna cubierta” (719-22). Thus Sor Marcela situates Celo far outside Covarrubias’s definition of *varón* as one possessing great reason and, by doing so, once again assigns ‘feminine’ characteristics to a male character and vice versa while allowing the female characters *varonilidad*.

The female characters decide not to send Celo to an asylum in order to spare “los pobres locos” (736) living there, and instead suggest that he foray to a strange and distant land with a foolish mission, “a ver si el Gran Turco / pone el turbante a derechas” (867-68). When it becomes clear that he will not leave of his own accord and they can no longer stand his antics, they summon two strong and silent men, Conocimiento Propio and Propio Desprecio, to have him forcibly removed. Schlau and Arenal insist that “madre Marcela projects self-knowledge and what today we call the overcoming of ego in two silent male figures” (230), and point out that silence was an attribute usually ascribed with women, since men were thought to be endowed with *discurso*. Fray Luis de León supports this position, equating speech with the public realm, and silence with the private. He writes, “Como son los hombres para lo público, así las mujeres para el encerramiento: y como es de los hombres el hablar, y el salir á luz, así dellas el encerrarse, y encubrirse” (213). In opposition to the traditional valorization of discourse

over silence, however, Sor Marcela praises this virtue, characteristic of monastic life, through the character of Sinceridad. She warns the nuns that as far as Celo is concerned, it is necessary “que en monasterio jamás / entrar, ni aun mirarle pueda” (1080-81) in order to preserve the sanctuary’s prized silence. By praising silence and ejecting Celo, the playwright juxtaposes positive and negative ‘feminine’ characteristics in order to show that she and the other nuns are capable of developing the good and foregoing the bad as a community of sisters.

Although the colloquy *Del nacimiento* does not feature Alma, its female characters and their actions do indeed mirror the convent space in their own way. First of all, Piedad, Contemplación, and Devoción exemplify an idealized solidarity through their actions. When Devoción is overwhelmed by the mystery of Christ’s birth, Piedad quickly steps in to help her friend. Later, Devoción invites her shepherdess friend, Contemplación, to accompany her and Piedad as they journey to the manger. Although Piedad does not know Contemplación, she automatically accepts her because of the friendship they both share with Devoción, stating, “no hago diferencia / en el amor que a las dos / tengo” (65-67). They also refer to the Virgin Mary’s womb as a “virgíneo claustro” (187) and note that each person who takes the sacrament internalizes Christ and is therefore like Mary. This permits the nuns to “ser madre y ser esposa” (206) simultaneously, since they both carry Christ within them as mothers and count on his companionship as wives. In this way, Sor Marcela also references and extols the “claustro” of the convent, which, like Mary’s womb, is a sacred place set apart from the world.

The playwright also privileges the female characters in this play by presenting them as serious and contemplative, while Regocijo behaves as would a greedy and ignorant *gracioso*. While the women meditate on religious themes, he proclaims, “mejor sé comer que amar / ni hablar las cosas de Dios / porque soy muy zafio y burdo, / sin estudio en tal lición” (632-36). Even when he attempts to participate in their spiritual discussion by recounting the Christmas story, Contemplación wishes he would stop being so long-winded, Devoción calls his speech a “torrente” (463-68), and Piedad expresses a desire to slap him on the forehead in the hopes of getting his ramblings back on track. Despite poking fun at the lone male character in the play, this humorous juxtaposition of the characters serves an important purpose. That is, that love brings together “las cosas más desiguales” (488-94). Therefore, despite the disparities between Regocijo and his female companions, their common purpose unites them and makes them equal to the task at hand.

Unlike in *Del nacimiento*, Alma plays a central role in *Santísimo sacramento*. This colloquy, however, does not fit into Smith’s set of four plays, chronicling Alma’s spiritual journey. Despite this, many elements of this drama reinforce the idea of Alma as a *mujer varonil* while confronting issues of gender. Sor Marcela presents Fervor,¹¹ a male character, as a well meaning, but sometimes misguided, companion. For example, Fervor expresses his desire to kill Negligencia, stating “aunque me juzguen por loco, / pienso la vida quitarla” (200-01), while a more tempered Alma insists it is better to throw her out rather than kill her. Reminiscent of other colloquies, Negligencia tempts Alma not to

¹¹ Arenal and Sabat de Rivers indicate that Sor Marcela herself played the role of Fervor, as indicated by the character’s assertion that “en vuestro servicio he escrito / . . . aquesta santa octava” (1330-31).

disobey, but rather to be somewhat lax in her obedience. In this way, she leads the protagonist astray in the subtlest manner possible.

As in her other plays, Sor Marcela makes no black and white valorizations in relation to gender. Female characters can be good, evil, or anything in between, as can male characters. That being said, the righteous female characters greatly outnumber their male counterparts, whom Christ, as the bridegroom, clearly trumps. Additionally, female friendship, while always a force to be reckoned with, can be used for good or ill. In *Santísimo sacramento*, Pureza provides Alma with much needed support and solidarity, while Negligencia, when faced with exile, insists that she cannot leave the country since her friends, Doñas Tibia, Fría, Helada, and Pereza, are all waiting for her. In regards to characterization, Alma demonstrates her *varonil* strength of character from the beginning. When she first encounters Negligencia, she does not waver, but rather forcefully declares, “¿No te he dicho, Negligencia, / que no te quiero en mi casa? / ¿Qué remedio he de tener / para que de ella salgas? / ¿Quieres que te eche por fuerza?” (266-70). She makes it clear that Negligencia represents no threat to the devotion she feels for her divine husband.

This fascinating juxtaposition of female camaraderie and support alongside the development of *varonil* characteristics perhaps suggests the development of a new perspective on women, which could only be cultivated within the simultaneously protective and restrictive confines of monastic life. As Lefebvre asserts, “When we invoke ‘space’, we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so . . . Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction” (12). Our knowledge of the convent space indicates that within its walls there were no male audience members to titillate by the presence of cross-dressing women, per Lope de Vega’s assertion. Nor was

it necessary to placate the public through the eventual subjugation of disturbingly uppity and confusingly nonconformist women. It is possible, then, that we need to reconsider the role of Alma as a *mujer varonil*. Perhaps Sor Marcela does not mean her to become increasingly more like a man, but rather slowly but surely realize her full human potential in order to eventually become an example of the inherent strength present in all women. The kind of *mujer varonil* that McKendrick refers to in her study is, in a certain sense, a temporary illusion, while Sor Marcela's version represents a very real, not to mention permanent, possibility.

Admittedly, the idea that one cannot only take on *varonilidad* temporarily, but also become *varonil*, assumes a certain feminist attitude on the part of the playwright and her audience. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to suppose that a certain sense of self-assuredness, along with a need for self-assertion, existed among these women. While, in theory, they lived almost exclusively outside the male realm, in reality they still felt its pervasive and sometimes oppressive influence. This push towards *varonilidad* certainly must have been a valuable lesson for these nuns who relied solely on their abilities and resourcefulness to combat the corporeal temptations which they faced daily. As Smith points out, allegory is "an expression of the collective autobiography" ("The Female Trinity" 242), and therefore, "the protagonist is an abstraction, but also the shared experience of author, actors, and audience" ("The Female Trinity" 243). Sor Marcela and her sisters-in-arms saw not only their "shared experience" reflected in *Alma* and her (mis)adventures, but also their shared potential.

I posit that Sor Marcela worked against the traditional presentation of the *mujer varonil* in order to further her own ideas about the ability of women to rise above the

'feminine' characteristics assigned to them by men. Rather than forcing the main female character to revert to her original characterization and abandon her newfound authority and control, Sor Marcela's plays portray the cultivation of these *varonil* characteristics not as a impermanent result of gendered performance, in the sense of Judith Butler's definition of the term, but rather as positive human characteristics that all in attendance must develop in order to gain their eternal reward. In point of fact, her characterization of female characters, such as *Mortificación*, *Desnudez*, *Oración*, and *Paz*, suggests that supposedly masculine qualities, such as "juizio, razon, y discurso," are either inherent in women or inherently feminine. As Arenal and Shlau suggest, "Sor Marcela may have been recalling and personifying St. Teresa's insistence that her Daughters demonstrate virility of character" (230). In doing so, she effectively works against writers such as Covarrubias and Hernando de Soto. She also places her works directly in alignment with the of other progressive European women writers, such as Christine de Pizan, author of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, whose "explicitly and strategically spatial perspective was applied to an allegorical idealization of the medieval city both to reveal its oppressive gendering and to imagine new sites and spaces of resistance" (Soja 107-108). This directly challenges Lefebvre's insistence that space is manipulated by authority figures in order to control its 'users,' and that this control is always met with silence from those 'users.' Feminism and feminist writing can serve as a means of protesting and overcoming enclosure, as evidenced by Sor Marcela's writing. For his part, Certeau frames seemingly inconsequential or unimportant actions within a space, such as performing plays for recreation, as "clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,' an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf"

(40). Hence the ‘users’ of the convent space did not remain silent when confronted with manipulation, but rather subtly remonstrated this attempt at control in their own unique way.

For this reason, Sor Marcela pushed and challenged the term *mujer varonil* beyond its *comedia* definition. As McKendrick explains, early modern playwrights perceived “the adjective *varonil* as a standard of excellence” in relation to “woman’s capacity for resolute action” (53). Sor Marcela utilized her allegorical plays as a didactic platform to teach and exhort her sisters-in-arms not to allow themselves to be defined by the external patriarchal society, which made its influence felt even within the walls of the convent, but rather to recognize their own value and potential as women. Sor Marcela knew that she and her spiritual sisters could rise above the carnal call of the body and the world in order to fulfill a divine destiny and answer a sacred calling.

CHAPTER II

Sisters-in-Arms and Letters: Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto

“The violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion.”
Henri Lefebvre

In her study on the lives of early modern women, Lisa Vollendorf discusses the convent as an essential element of life in Inquisitional Spain. Focusing specifically on literary production, she notes, “Out of these all-female communities emerged a textual history that records a rich and variable convent culture. To a large extent, that textual history conflicts with traditional assertions about women’s place in early modern European society” (93). With Vollendorf’s affirmation in mind, this chapter focuses on the dramatic works of María de San Alberto (1568-1640) and Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570-1646). Cecilia and María were biological as well as spiritual sisters who lived together in a Discalced Carmelite convent in Valladolid. The arrangement of two sisters inhabiting the same convent was highly unusual, but most likely a result of the favorable influence of several of their family members, since six of their seven brothers were clergymen, and four of these held positions of power and influence within the Catholic Church.

As is the case with most nun playwrights, very few scholars have written critical studies about their works, despite Blanca Alonso-Cortés’s argument that “las Madres

María de San Alberto y Cecilia del Nacimiento figuran entre los mejores cultivadores de nuestra poesía mística” (Alonso-Cortés 6), published in a 1944 doctoral thesis that explores Sor Cecilia and Sor María’s prose, poetry, and theater. Her work offers several noteworthy insights into the intellectual formation and literary production of the two sister nuns. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau have also worked with the writings of Sor Cecilia and Sor María, whom they study and cite in their anthology of nuns’ writings, *Untold Sisters*. The sisters’ poetry can also be seen in both facsimile and a modern edition contained in a two-volume collection titled *Libro de Romances y Coplas del Carmelo de Valladolid*, compiled by Víctor García de la Concha and Ana María Álvarez Pellitero. Additionally, all of Sor Cecilia’s works can be found in an anthology titled *Obras completas: Notas críticas y estudio de su vida mística*, edited by Padre José M. Díaz Cerón. The efforts of these scholars have opened the way for more critical studies, and provided us with texts that would otherwise be inaccessible.¹²

In order to understand Sor Cecilia and Sor María’s literary production, we must first look to the educational formation they received at home before entering the Convento de la Concepción del Carmen. To begin with, Sor María and Sor Cecilia were born in a “university family” (Arenal and Schlau 131) living in Valladolid at the end of the sixteenth century. Their Portuguese father, Antonio Sobrino (1518?-1588), met and married their mother, Cecilia Morillas (1539-1581), while he was studying law in Salamanca. He became the secretary of the university in 1556, and went on to hold “numerous other positions of confidence, both secular and ecclesiastic” (Arenal and Schlau 132). Arenal and Schlau note that María de San Alberto credited solely her

¹² The nuns of the Concepción del Carmen convent are currently in the process of preserving Sor María and Sor Cecilia’s works, and no longer allow their manuscripts to be seen by outside researchers, for fear of damaging them.

mother, Cecilia Morillas, for guiding her both intellectually and spiritually. Cecilia, the mother of two girls and seven boys, was not formally educated due to the strict gender restrictions on schooling of the time period, and yet she learned alongside her eldest son, Francisco, as he studied. Cecilia also participated in classes given to her other children. D. M. Villar y Macía, historiographer of Salamanca, recorded that “Esta mujer extraordinaria supo con perfección las lenguas castellana, portuguesa, italiana, francesa, latina y griega” (qtd. in Alonso-Cortés 8). She even utilized her fluency in French and Latin to write official correspondence for her husband. Vollendorf notes the unusual nature of this type of education when she writes, “The women who gained an education outside convent walls did so in spite of the mandate to provide women with only enough education to make them good wives – certainly not good scholars, activists, or writers” (170). Highly educated women like Cecilia were few and far between.

She also showed great skill in drawing and painting, as well as an impressive familiarity with architecture, and possessed many musical talents. What is more, her mastery of philosophy and theology was such that “sus hijos la consultaban los puntos más arduos, sometiéndose a su dictamen” (D. M. Villar y Macías, qtd. in Alonso-Cortés 8). She used the knowledge garnered from her independent learning to instruct the rest of her nine¹³ children in the arts and humanities. All of her progeny, including Sor Cecilia and her sister Sor María, “became gifted painters, musicians, and writers” (Arenal and Schlau 132). Arenal and Schlau point out that Cecilia Morillas often hosted intellectuals and artists in her home, and that even King Phillip II recognized her “as an intellectual, artist, inventor, and illuminator” (Arenal and Schlau 132). In fact, her work was so

¹³ The historiographer of Salamanca, Villar y Macías, writes that Cecilia Morillas and Antonio Sobrino had ten children, but Alonso-Cortés records that they were the parents of nine children, as do Arenal and Schlau.

exemplary that Phillip commissioned her to illuminate several manuscripts for the famous El Escorial. Overall, María and Cecilia's family "estuvo formada de ingenios privilegiados, que brillaron . . . en el cultivo de las letras" (Alonso-Cortés 5). By all accounts, each member of this illustrious family was well educated and notably successful in his or her endeavors.

When Cecilia Morillas's daughters, María and Cecilia, decided to take their vows, their reputations preceded them, and so, many different convents extended them invitations. Arenal and Schlau indicate that "As educated members of an influential family, they would have been an important asset to any cloistered community" (133). Nevertheless, their mother's influence, along with that of Saint Teresa, compelled them to reject an invitation to join the prestigious Cistercian¹⁴ convent of Las Huelgas — their mother's final resting place — in favor of the apparently more austere Concepción de Nuestra Señora del Carmen convent. Their choice to join the strict Discalced Carmelite order allowed them to devote themselves more fully to scholarly pursuits, thus reflecting the influence of their mother's impressive intellectualism. They took their vows on January 17, 1588, when Sor María had just turned nineteen and Sor Cecilia had not quite reached the age of seventeen. The sisters spent almost all of their lives together, living, working, and writing side by side.

After their ingress into the convent, both sisters held positions of importance throughout the years. María served twice as the Mother Superior, as well as Sacristan,

¹⁴ This order was founded at the end of the eleventh century as an attempt to return to original Benedictine values and in order to institute "a life of poverty, simplicity, and eremitical solitude" ("Cistercians"). Incidentally, the Cistercians also founded the Spanish military order of Calatrava in 1158.

Doorkeeper, Mistress of Novices, and Prioress.¹⁵ Her younger sister, Cecilia, also held the offices of Mistress of Novices, Sacristan, and Doorkeeper, as well as Subprioress. Tellingly, they often worked together, particularly as copyists, secretaries and archivists, with each sister graciously acknowledging the other's contribution to their collective work. Arenal and Schlau credit the sisters not only with good leadership and successful collaborative work, but also insist that "They were the moving spirits behind the creation of a rich literary life hidden by the walls of the convent. The sisters provided an example and created an atmosphere in which poetry was nurtured and collaboration encouraged" (133). Indeed, the nuns currently living in the sisters' convent in Valladolid still hold them in high regard more than three centuries after their death, despite the fact that the literary community at large has generally forgotten them.

The *Libro de romances y coplas del Carmelo de Valladolid*, a collection of unattributed poetic works penned by the nuns of the Convento de la Concepción, clearly reflects the highly literary atmosphere that the two sisters encouraged *intramuros*. García de la Concha and Álvarez Pellitero, the editors of this volume, rightly maintain that these works go beyond our traditional notion of poetry, as their authors wrote them not to be published, but rather performed. In line with Saint Teresa de Jesús's admonition that convent life should include recreation "como contrapunto de la jornada eremética," "El canto de coplas y villancicos, junto con las pequeñas representaciones, vino a desempeñar en tal sentido un papel predominante" within the convent (García de la Concha and Álvarez Pellitero ix). The theatricality of this poetry is evident in both the form and the content of many of these pieces. For example, poems 89 and 90, both dedicated to the

¹⁵ She was first elected to be the Mother Superior in 1600 at the age of thirty-two, and became the Prioress in 1604, at the age of thirty-six. Alonso-Cortés insists that she indubitably possessed "admirables dotes para el gobierno de la Comunidad y administración de sus bienes" (42).

Host, or sacramental wafer, employ a *pregunta* and *respuesta* format that clearly indicates the participation of two voices. The dialogic nature of these poems calls for performers to present the work in a call and response format that is inherently theatrical and performative. Others are more explicitly so. The titles of poems 262 and 263 not only indicate the need for two performers, but name the characters involved, as well. The first is titled “Otro en que pregunta la escritura a cristo” (244), and the second is labeled “Soneto en que abla cristo y el pecador” (245).¹⁶ Both employ the very same call and response structure, such as “con que os le pagaran – con buen serviçio” and “por do as de començar – por suplicarte” (245). Others, such as poems 319, 321, and 324, list character names next to the lines of poetry, thus closely resembling a traditional theater script. They employ both earthly characters, like the rustic Gil and Pascual, and immortal ones, like Alma and Amor. Still other poems are more subtle in their theatricality. Poem 328, “Del santissimo sacramento,” for one, begins with the dialogue, “mira gil / que quieres anton” (296), thereby indicating that the continuation of the lines must be divided among these two rustic characters, and the division must be determined based on content alone. Likewise, poem 75 indicates the participation of two players by alternating between two voices identifiable only within the poem itself. It begins, “sois vos la rreçien parida / yo soy la que virgen quede / pues veso las manos a vuesa merced” (64), thereby indicating a conversation between the Virgin Mary and a shepherd, or *pastor*, as she addresses him later on in the dialogue. This anthology of poetry not only indicates a theatrical tradition unique to convent life, but also enhances our understanding of the performative

¹⁶ García de la Concha and Álvarez Pellitero note that both of these have been attributed to Cecilia del Nacimiento, although the poem itself is unsigned. It is unclear what criteria they have used to determine this attribution.

atmosphere present *intramuros*, which both Sor Cecilia and Sor María encouraged and fomented through their participation in it.

Besides penning theater, both sister nuns were prolific writers of poetry and prose, as well. Their works include letters, *vidas*, mystic and ascetic texts, glosses, devotional and instructional tracts, commentaries, and interpretations. Notwithstanding their abundant literary production, this chapter focuses specifically on Sor Cecilia's *Fiestecilla para una profesión religiosa*, and Sor María's two *Fiestas del Nacimiento*, as evidence of "the female tradition of convent writing, unbroken for over a thousand years" (Arenal and Schlau 149). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's in-depth study on women's writing, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, aids and facilitates the study of these works. Although this theoretical treatise focuses on modern women writers, particularly those of the nineteenth century, it offers a very helpful theoretical framework within which to study earlier authors and their texts. Gilbert and Gubar utilize Harold Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence to formulate their own theory of a gender specific writing experience, which they term the anxiety of authorship.

Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence does not take gender issues into account. Bloom asserts that "a poem is a response to a poet, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent. Trying to write a poem takes the poet back to the origins of what a poem *first was for him*" (18). Although the use of the masculine possessive "his" and the masculine pronoun "him" does not necessarily evidence a gender bias, it can be argued that Bloom's theory seems to ignore or gloss over an important tradition of female writers. In her response to Bloom, aptly titled, "A Map for Rereading" as a play on Bloom's *A Map of Misreading*, Annette Kolodny argues,

Bloom's paradigm of poetic history, when applied to women, proves useful only in a negative sense: for by omitting the possibility of poet-mothers from his psychodynamic of literary influence . . . Bloom effectively masks the fact of an *other* tradition entirely – that in which women taught one another how to read and write about and out of their own unique (and sometimes isolated) contexts. (60)

Despite this critique of his gendered blindness, perhaps better called exclusion, Bloom's theory still holds water, in a sense, for female literary creation. He explains,

You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that person's writing or teaching or thinking or reading. Your relation to what informs that person *is* tradition, for tradition is influence that extends past one generation, a carrying-over of influence. (32)

He goes on to assert that the most successful poets misread their predecessors' works, but these women poets participate not in misreading, but rather in magnification. Sor Cecilia and Sor María do not reformulate or rework the writings of their literary foremothers, but rather build on them. There is no "battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites" (Bloom, qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 6). Absent is the need to figuratively kill the predecessor, and in its place we find a desire to augment and amplify what she has done. These women wish not to surpass nor to outdo, but to honor.

Notwithstanding their general lack of concern for breaking free of that which has come before, women writers experience a very real anxiety in regards to the act of literary creation. Gilbert and Gubar argue that this anxiety stems from "a radical fear that she cannot create" (49), or perhaps, in the context of the convent, that she should not create, since Writing, after all, constitutes an act of pride and thus directly conflicts with the emphasis on humility in Catholicism" (Vollendorf 120). This is answered and alleviated, however, by the formation of a female literary tradition. This quest for "the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture" (Gilbert and Gubar 51) makes itself very

apparent in these women writers. María and Cecilia's writing benefitted greatly from their own collaboration within the convent as well as from the influence of their highly educated and acclaimed mother, among other female predecessors. Of course, Gilbert and Gubar do not speak of early modern women writers when they insist, "the daughter of too few mothers, today's female writer feels that she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging" (50). Nevertheless, the concept of the anxiety of authorship can and should be applied to Golden Age nun playwrights who revised genres and "swerved" from male literary history by "enacting a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition" (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Sor Cecilia and Sor María, along with their literary and religious sisters-in-arms, do not completely break with traditional literature written by men,¹⁷ but their writings do point towards the creation of a unique feminine literary tradition that is directly in keeping with Gilbert and Gubar's contention.

Nevertheless, such a tradition can be problematic. Elaine Showalter points out that "If a man's text, as Bloom and Edward Said have maintained, is fathered, then a woman's text is not only mothered but parented; it confronts both paternal and maternal precursors and must deal with the problems and advantages of both lines of inheritance" ("Feminist" 265). Women writers must be aware of and confront all predecessors, male and female, even when living in a strictly women's space akin to the ideal one envisioned by Pizan. As Showalter asserts, no writing can totally escape the hegemonic constraints imposed upon women by a society dominated by men. Nun playwrights such as Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto, however, 'chose marginality,' as bell hooks advocates, and this very marginality allows for the creation of "spaces in the margins of

¹⁷ In fact, Padre José M. Díaz Cerón affirms that past critics have erroneously attributed some of their poems to San Juan de la Cruz, a renowned mystic writer and their contemporary (7).

hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparatus” (Teresa de Laurentis, qtd. in Soja 111). Here, in the margins, the interstices, the chinks, and the cracks, is where a female tradition of teaching, learning, and writing flourishes.

Sor María and Sor Cecilia clearly benefitted from this tradition, as did many other convent writers. As Vollendorf argues, “many texts produced in convents can be viewed as constituting their own educational enterprise of woman-to-woman instruction” (176). Although the two sisters were very young when their mother died,¹⁸ it is clear that she had a great impact on them. Their brother, Fray Diego, records that “Poco pudieron alcanzar de la enseñanza de su madre mis dos hermanas, por haber quedado muy niñas cuando ella les faltó; pero no pudieron dejar de heredar las habilidades y gracia de naturaleza como los demás” (qtd. in Alonso-Cortés 25). Historical documents do not suggest that their mother wrote literature, of course, but we do know that Cecilia Morillas “escribió con tal perfección en toda clase de caracteres” (D. M. Villar y Macías, qtd. in Alonso-Cortés 8) and that she alone taught her children Latin, as well as reading, writing, and the liberal arts. Also, Sor Cecilia herself recorded that “Lo más ordinario me estaba con mi madre, y muchas veces oyéndola cosas de la Sagrada Escritura, que como me veía inclinada a ello, aun desde muy pequeña, me las decía, hasta que murió . . . me enseñó los principios de la Gramática y cosas de virtud y devoción” (qtd. in Alonso-Cortés 60). Despite the fact that no evidence exists of her literary production, she nevertheless proved an intellectual predecessor to both of her daughters, thereby alleviating, to a certain extent, their anxiety of authorship. Arenal and Schlau point out that Sor Cecilia and Sor

¹⁸ Sor María was thirteen years old, and Sor Cecilia was only eleven when Cecilia Morillas passed away at the age of forty-two.

María “were authorized in the cultivation of their intellectual and spiritual leadership by three powerful maternal figures” (137) – their biological mother, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Teresa. Both sisters looked to all three models for inspiration as they formed a “secret sisterhood” of a “literary subculture.”

The founder of their convent, Saint Teresa herself, participated in the creation of many literary works. In her study of Teresa’s letters, Barbara Mujica postulates that “Teresa probably enjoyed writing and welcomed the opportunity to defend her spiritual practices and reformist ideas” (*Teresa x*). As the author of her own *vida* (*Libro de la vida*), *El castillo interior*, *Libro de las fundaciones*, and *Camino de perfección*, she became the perfect literary foremother and example for the two sisters. Mujica notes how Teresa’s writings, especially her letters, show the impressive way in which she “manipulated language” (*Teresa xi*), and explains that “Writing was vital to Teresa’s mission, and an enormous amount of writing went on in her convents. Many religious houses were veritable intellectual centers where nuns produced *Vidas* (life stories or spiritual memoirs), chronicles, hagiographies, religious treatises, poetry and plays, and, of course, letters” (*Teresa 9*). Although Teresa died in 1582, before either Cecilia or María took their vows as nuns of the same Discalced Carmelite order that the saint helped to establish, her presence and importance as founder of the order and of the Concepción del Carmen convent was surely felt as strongly as it is today.¹⁹

In fact, Sor María wrote poems in favor of the beatification and canonization of Saint Teresa, and both she and her sister Cecilia participated in and even won *certámenes*

¹⁹ The nuns currently residing in this same convent maintain an impressive collection of highly prized manuscripts, religious articles, and relics related to Saint Teresa. They keep them under lock and key in a glass cabinet secured with thick wooden doors, which is located in the entryway to the convent, but proudly show them to interested visitors.

dedicated to what was then the newest saint in the Catholic hagiographic universe. Some of the sisters' best work was created in honor of Teresa of Ávila. In the rules she set forth for the order, Saint Teresa encouraged the creation of religious art as a way of staving off "monastic melancholy" (Arenal and Schlau 134). This art, as we know, ranged from painting and sewing to writing and acting, and Sor Cecilia and Sor María created more than their fair share of religious art dedicated to their spiritual mother.²⁰ Through their poetry the sisters "refashioned the image of Saint Teresa, emphasizing her androgynous femaleness — womanist rather than womanish — and her intellectual ability. They applied their humanistic education to characterizing her in their poetry" (Arenal and Schlau 138). The sisters even utilized titles such as *doctora*, *pastora*, *patriarca*, and *guerrera* to talk about their beloved role model. These feminized versions of appellations usually reserved for men indicated an appreciation of the saint's *varonilidad*. Sor María and Sor Cecilia's theater, prose, and poetry make it clear that Saint Teresa served as their spiritual, moral, and literary foremother by privileging the mystic ideal of direct and intimate communication with the divine.

In turn, the figure of the Virgin Mary also influenced the sisters' intellectual pursuits, albeit not as extensively as their other two principal foremothers — Cecilia Morillas and Saint Teresa. They did not look to the mother of Christ as a literary predecessor, but they did perceive in her a certain authorizing power in which they partook by proxy. Their position within the convent as spiritual mothers created a direct correlation between them and the Virgin. In fact, "The role of mothers — metaphorical

²⁰ Some of these are "A nuestra madre Santa Teresa, pastora del Monte Carmelo," "Villancico a Santa Teresa," "Romance en endecha a nuestra madre Santa Teresa de Jesús," "Soneto al dardo del serafín que pasó el corazón de nuestra madre Santa Teresa," "Otro a la gloria de nuestra santa," "Tercetos a nuestra madre Santa Teresa," and "Quintas a nuestra madre Santa Teresa de Jesús."

and biological — . . . figures prominently in many texts produced in convents” (Vollendorf 174). What is more, the religious vows the sisters took upon entering the convent meant they were also brides of Christ, thus allowing and encouraging them to participate in an intimate, personal, and mystical relationship with Jesus. In effect, Mary was their spiritual mother-in-law, and they all partook in a personal and meaningful connection with the same divine figure, Sor Cecilia and Sor María as wives, and the Virgin as mother. Hence, all three were able to lay claim to the same spiritual authority.²¹

Indubitably, this authority was both enhanced and limited by the physical space of the convent itself, as well as the practices carried out within it and the control imposed upon it from without. Although most texts composed *intramuros* were not usually subject to the watchful eye of the Inquisition, “writing nuns lived under strict surveillance” (Arenal and Schlau 135), and censorship of their works was a very real possibility. As Soja explains,

Those who are territorially subjugated by the workings of hegemonic power have two inherent choices: either accept their imposed differentiation and division, making the best of it; or mobilize to resist, drawing upon their putative positioning, their assigned “otherness,” to struggle against this power-filled imposition. These choices are inherently spatial responses, individual and collective reactions to the ordered workings of power in perceived, conceived, and lived spaces. (87)

In other words, the space of the convent allowed for the territorial subjugation of the nuns, but the constant presence and influence of “hegemonic power” allowed them to choose resistance or submission. This is directly in keeping with Vollendorf’s assertion that “nuns were living examples of the wrong-headedness of those who described women as the weaker sex. Women living in and out of convents developed specific strategies for

²¹ This trio of female authority is reminiscent of that created by Sor Marcela de San Félix in her *coloquio espiritual, La muerte del apetito*.

combating the ideologies that defined them as inferior and incapable” (185). Sor Cecilia and Sor María’s texts indicate that they chose to resist hegemonic power and the ideologies it attempted to inscribe on them.

One way in which they did so was by usurping traditional religious literary genres and themes, and making them their own. Although monks and missionaries alike utilized theater to catechize and educate both within Iberian monasteries and in the world at large,²² the short dramatic format of the *fiesta*, or the *fiestecilla*, appears to be unique to nun writers. Arenal and Schlau illustrate the significance of this type of theater when they explain that although this type of recreation was not always sanctioned by the Catholic Church as an acceptable practice for cloistered nuns, “the *fiestas* enabled women ‘dead to the world’ to laugh, cry, sing, dance, act, speak, and dress in costume. The performances provided a break in the monotony and tedium that Teresa de Jesús called the scourge of convent life” (148). What is more, even though the nuns employed tropes widely utilized by male authors in their works, such as allegorical figures or the oft-repeated dramatic action of shepherds arriving to worship the newborn Jesus, they did so in a way that revealed both female authorship and a feminine literary tradition. As Lisa Vollendorf points out, “Regardless of genre, many of these [convent] texts center on female spirituality, convent politics, and women’s relationships with each other” (95). In other words, convent writing is uniquely feminine.

I posit that the space of the convent itself allows for and even demands such a unique form of theater and best serves the creation and continuation of a female literary

²² Perhaps the best and most well-known example of this is the Jesuit José de Anchieta’s didactic and religious theatre, which he employed to catechize and convert the indigenous Tupi-Guarani population of Brazil. One such play was his *Auto representado na festa de São Lourenço*. Jesuits also used theatre as an educational tool among themselves and in their schools.

tradition. As with Sor Marcela de San Félix's *coloquios espirituales*, "Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors . . . The pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, his competence and performance" (Lefebvre 57).

Although here Lefebvre does not make specific reference to theater, despite his use of language such as "actors" and "performance," his ideas on space reveal important aspects of convent theater. For one, the convent space itself, along with all its inherent practices, rites, rituals, and culture, was "in place" before the appearance in it of the two sisters.

Therefore, the convent space itself both limited and enabled what they created *intramuros*. For example, the Convento de la Concepción del Carmen excluded most men and generally limited male presence within its walls, apart from male confessors or ecclesiastical leaders who had the authority to infiltrate the female space. Living "removed from the pressures of a patriarchal, class-conscious society," the nuns "found in the core of their belief systems the courage and stamina to confront a patriarchy determined to keep women in their place" (Mujica, *Teresa* 1). Thus a space of control is subverted to create a space of resistance.

This certainly holds true in the case of Sor María and Sor Cecilia. To begin with, both sisters either exclude or limit the presence of masculine characters in their drama. Intriguingly, Sor María's *Fiestecilla del Nacimiento I* does not feature any male characters in prominent roles. As this play begins, two nuns, dressed in their habits in order to maintain the level of propriety expected in the convent,²³ come on stage and sing a short introduction. Here they explain that the purpose of their "fiesta singular" is "en reverencia del rey / que ha nacido en el portal" (157). They then introduce four beautiful

²³ We know much about costuming and stage directions due to the many notes the author wrote in the margins of the original manuscript. In this instance, Sor María writes, "Sería necesario que saliesen como monjas por la propiedad" (156).

virgins who will represent all others and are beloved by God. These four characters, Pobreza, Castidad, Obediencia, and Paciencia, jointly declare that they will make offerings unto the Christ child. Poverty goes first, recognizable by the homespun cloth she wears, and, kneeling, presents him with a gift wrapped in sackcloth,²⁴ most likely representing humility, although its meaning is not explicitly expressed in the play itself. Then Chastity kneels and offers him a lily,²⁵ which represents purity. Obedience follows, giving him a yoke as a symbol of submission.²⁶ García de la Concha and Álvarez Pellitero point out that these three items represent the vows taken by the Discalced Carmelite nuns (xxxviii). The sackcloth denotes the vow of poverty, the lily relates to the vow of chastity, and the yoke symbolizes the vow of obedience. This reflection of convent life within a play written in celebration of the birth of Christ unmistakably indicates the inevitable influence of spatial practice on dramatic works written *intramuros*. Finally, Patience bestows a cross on the child, since “el venir a ser humano / es para que muriendos[e] nos salve Jesús” (158). The four virtues then kneel in adoration, and subsequently dance together as the two nuns who first appeared onstage sing praises to the infant and bring attention to the presence of the devil onstage. As they declare “pase el demonio adelante / y váyase al infierno en hora mala” (159), a devil character appears and crosses the stage slowly enough to allow the audience a good look. The virtues interpret the final stanzas through dance while the singing nuns revel in the prospect of salvation from evil, brought about by the birth of Christ. Here the playwright emphasizes that the gift of salvation is made possible because “la persona / del verbo Hijo del Padre /

²⁴ Although a direct reference to her costuming is mentioned in the dialogue itself, we know about the appearance of the gift from Sor María’s notes.

²⁵ Sor María indicates that if a real lily is not available, the players may make one out of paper.

²⁶ Here the playwright explains that if the nuns cannot use a real yoke, they may fashion a representation of a yoke from a straight and a curved stick.

haya salido de madre” (159; my emphasis). Only through the joint participation of the Virgin Mary, one of the sisters’ three foremothers, with God the Father is the mission of the son made possible. The play ends with an indication that the nuns can present *entremeses* immediately afterwards.²⁷

During the main dramatic action of the play, as the four virgins greet the baby Jesus and offer him gifts, it is clear that the acquisition of these four feminine virtues alone is necessary in order for the nuns, and by extension, all humankind, to approach the divine. Tellingly, no mention is made of the virtues’ physical appearance, apart from a passing mention of Pobreza’s costuming. This is an indication of the influence of Saint Teresa on Sor María’s writing. As Mujica explains, “Male authors, from poets to moralists, described women in terms of their bodies, focusing on their beauty or chastity. Teresa, on the other hand, insisted on woman’s spiritual dimension” (*Teresa* 142). In the convent, women’s spirituality necessarily trumps their attractiveness. What is more, the female characters in this drama obviously take precedence over their male counterparts. Although the devil does appear onstage, he has no lines and serves more as a prop than a character, since his only function is to illustrate the fact that because of the birth of the Christ child, he no longer has power over mankind. The two singing nuns that open and close the play function as authoritative voice throughout, and the four virtues are responsible not only for the main action, but also the presentation of the central message. By privileging female characters, this *fiestecilla* “validates interpersonal relationships among women and emphasizes the powers of religious devotion,” as convent literature as a whole often does (Vollendorf 96).

²⁷ The notes in the margin indicate that the author had a specific unnamed “entremesico” in mind (Arenal and Schlau 159), but that between the play and the *entremes*, the two singing nuns could sing ballads, octavas, or anything else they please.

Sor María's *Fiesta del Nacimiento II*, unlike her first drama, does in fact call for male characters, but their main task is to sing in a choral fashion. As the play begins, two shepherdesses come onstage singing,²⁸ after which the first laments the fact that her constant exposure to the sun while tending her flocks has tanned her face. The second reassures her that "la morena enamora / si gracia con ella mora" (160), and the first resigns herself to the inevitability of having darkened skin. Although this detail may seem frivolous, it is actually quite telling in regards to societal expectations and pressures. Not only does the lamentation over darkened skin establish the rusticity of the main characters, but it also serves as a gentle reproach to those nuns in attendance who perhaps still felt the pull of the outside world. The playwright utilizes her two shepherdesses to underscore the ridiculous nature of earthly concerns, such as the desire for beauty, when compared to the lasting eternal matters at hand.

Immediately after this dialogue, shepherds enter the stage singing and dancing. Through their song they explain that since their flocks are now safe in the pasture and the moon shines brightly, they will take time to celebrate. Uninhibited by worry, they declare "todos cantaremos / y un baile concertado / podemos hacer / en este verde prado / tomemos placer" (161). This glib shunning of responsibility in favor of immediate pleasure is a critique of male desire as seen in other convent dramas, such as in Sor Marcela de San Félix's *La muerte del apetito*, in which the playwright characterizes Appetite, the only male character, as a worldly *galán* interested only in his immediate carnal desires. The first shepherdess immediately chastises and corrects her counterparts, explaining "pastores / miremos por el Ganado / no ande descarriado / entre lobos

²⁸ There is no indication either in the text itself or in the notes written in the margin as to what these characters should sing.

robadores” (161). Notwithstanding this chastisement, she admits that there is a time and a place for everything, since “allá en viniendo la fiesta / podemos muy bien bailar / vosotros zapatear / en reposando la siesta” (161). In this way, the playwright softens the original criticism, indicating that the shepherds’ desire is not inappropriate in and of itself, but rather simply out of place and time.

Suddenly, an offstage angelic voice declares the birth of Christ in Latin. Although the particular phrase she uses is commonly found in Catholic scripture and doctrine,²⁹ we must recognize that Sor María’s ability to write in Latin is evidence not only of her training as a nun, but also of the education provided her by her impressively erudite mother. The second shepherdess is the first to interpret the declaration, both in terms of its literal meaning and its religious significance. The first shepherd is stunned and his only response to the news is an expression of his immense surprise and joy, declaring “qué cumplido / es este gozo que siento / quien me quiatara el contento / donde estoy metido” (161). Once again, the first shepherdess chides her companion, telling him “no se te pase en gozar / un tiempo tan limitado / sino dejando el Ganado / vamos le luego a buscar / que no te faltarán gozos” (161). Just as before, the shepherdess’s reprimand makes it clear that the shepherd is not wrong in expressing his joy, but that his lack of action is not an appropriate reaction to the situation at hand. Her words illustrate his choice — he can either stay in the fields marveling at the news brought by the angel, or he can experience even greater joy by visiting the newborn Jesus in the manger. Now is the appropriate time for them to leave their flocks behind. The first shepherd complains about the difficulty of the road ahead, and marvels at what he is feeling, as he is unable to

²⁹ This phrase is “Anuncio vobis gaudio magno qui a hodie natus est Salvator. Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax” (161).

comprehend it. Incapable of naming his emotion, he asks the second shepherdess for guidance, inquiring “Di, pastora, ¿qué habrá sido?” (162). Like her female companion before her, she clearly acts as the voice of reason when she explains that what he is feeling is “gran fuerza y alegría” (162), brought on by the angel’s marvelous proclamation.

Once the group arrives at the manger, the first shepherdess is the first of her companions to speak. This speech has two purposes. First, it allows her to praise the beauty of Christ child and marvel in the miracle of his birth. Second, it provides her with yet another opportunity to reprove one of her unthinking male companions, saying “Tú, pastor, que no podías / sufrir el gran accidente / que oyendo la voz sentías / mira lo que ves presente” (162). Thus she reminds him of his weakness and his inability to comprehend what has been clear to her since the heavenly messenger made his or her announcement. Tellingly, the shepherd does not respond to this criticism, therefore silently acceding to her intimation of his error. Upon entering the manger, the first shepherdess continues to speak, making the first offering. She praises the baby Jesus once again, and gives him both her “voluntad y ganado” (162). Her twofold gift is both material and spiritual, and serves as a model for the others. The second shepherdess offers a “jarrilla / llena de manteca y miel” and then addresses the Virgin Mary, asking her politely to return the little pot once she is done with it, “porque la traigo prestada” (163). At first glance, this humorous moment seems incongruous to the reverent feel of the drama, but is clearly reflective of convent life as well as indicative of the influence of Saint Teresa. Speaking of the sisters of the Discalced Carmelite order, Arenal and Schlauf explain that “Theirs was Teresa’s God, who ‘walked among the pots and pans.’ They

inserted the idiom of everyday life into the abstract language of mysticism” (134). Garcia de la Concha and Álvarez Pellitero also note that many Carmelite works reflect Saint Teresa’s affinity for mixing the divine with the quotidian (xlv), such as poem 286, which utilizes a salad metaphor — speaking of “lechuga,” “peregil,” “yervas,” “aceyte,” “binagre,” “açucar,” and “saçon” — to discuss various elements of convent life (261-62). Although, on the surface, the sisters’ beliefs may seem masked by their rustic language and figures — such as a shepherdess concerned for a seemingly unimportant object — their mysticism still shines through in subtle ways.

As the play continues, the first shepherd offers “esta alma mía” and “el corazón,” and indicates his willingness to serve the child (163). The second shepherd gives the baby a lamb as a sign of Christ’s humility and gentleness, as well as an allusion to his sacrifice. The drama closes with this stanza: “O, cuán alto y soberano / es el amor que se encierra / en hacernos nuestro hermano / tomando *madre* en la tierra” (163; my emphasis). As in the *fiestecilla*, although the action centers around the gifts offered to the Christ child, Sor María makes sure to make mention of the Virgin, not once, but twice. She subtly highlights the significance and necessity of the participation of Mary as mother, and underscores her indispensable role in the salvation of mankind. Furthermore, Sor María once again privileges female characters over male character. As we see, the two *pastores* enjoy their own individualized characterization and fully participate in the dramatic action, but mainly serve to provide a counterpoint to the two *pastoras*, who play more of central role and function as the voice of reason within the drama. By continually placing wisdom and common sense in the mouths of the shepherdesses and by making the confused shepherds merely reactionary, the playwright undermines the concept of men as

the ultimate seat of reason, as did Sor Marcela in her *coloquios espirituales*. Despite this, Sor María does not portray the male characters as buffoons or clowns. Their desire to dance and sing rather than watch their flocks is no more humorous than the second shepherdess's request for the return of the borrowed jar. The author does not paint the shepherds as foolish, but rather somewhat childish. She simply suggests that their basic inclinations need a little feminine guidance to keep them focused and on track.

Sor Cecilia's *Fiestecilla para una profesión religiosa* relies on a much more basic plot structure and a limited cast of characters.³⁰ As opposed to her sister, she does, in fact, utilize male characters in prominent roles in her play. Esposo, dressed as a shepherd, comes onstage with Amor, costumed as Cupid, complete with a bow and a quiver, and begins the play with a powerful monologue. In it he compares himself to a lion that Amor's arrow has wounded and humbled, forcing him to leave "el soberano albergue / de mi Padre, que a mí solo / por Unigénito tiene" (185). Upon admitting his love for Esposa, he entreats Amor to act as intercessor between him and the object of his affection, explaining "Herido a su puerta estoy, / dirás-la, Amor, que si quiere / abrir la puerta a su Esposo, / que a darla la mano viene" (185). Amor promises to wound her as he has wounded Esposo, and reassures his first victim "Que te abrirá no dudes, / y si abrir no quisiere, la costar tan caro / que arrepentida quede" (185). He then directs his words towards the hut where Esposa is sleeping, costumed as a shepherdess, and asks her how she can sleep so soundly when enemies surround her on all sides, waiting to attack. Bidding her to wake, Amor announces the presence of "el más galán Pastor / que habita en la montaña" (186). The shepherdess awakens and recognizes the voice of the

³⁰ Arenal and Schlau's edition of this play does not include the second shepherdess that appears in other editions. They identify her as a minor figure that is not integral to the dramatic action.

Bridegroom as he first declares his love for her, and then chides her for not responding to his declaration of affection.

Surprisingly, the shepherdess invents excuses to keep from opening the door to him. She lamely explains that she is not dressed, and that she has just washed her feet and refuses to dirty them by going to the door shoeless, which may be in reference to the playwright's own discalced order, as well as a commentary on vanity. As in much convent theater, the main female character represents each nun in attendance, meaning that the Sor Cecilia uses the self-interested shepherdess to both give expression to her own weaknesses, along with those of her sisters, and to ridicule these flaws. Nonetheless, this self-aware moment does not necessarily indicate a lack of self-esteem or express self-loathing on the part of the playwright, but rather lays bare a common ploy employed in convent theater. As Vollendorf explains, "Saint Teresa and her cohort often called upon a rhetoric of humility and a colloquial style to avoid posing a threat to the church" (97). This was just one of the tactics that nuns employed to stay in the good graces of their ecclesiastical leaders. Among spatial theorists, Certeau pays special attention to the use of such tactics in spaces controlled by outside forces. He posits:

The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. . . . It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. (37)

What Certeau alludes to, but fails to expressly mention here, is that by utilizing a tactic, such as the expression of humility or the admission of flaws and faults, the weak can become strong in their resistance to the hegemonic powers that seek to exercise control over a space and its inhabitants.

After the shepherdess refuses to let them in, Amor and Esposo respond to her “ingratitude” (186) by letting fly an arrow that promptly hits its mark. After Amor and Esposo exit the stage, Esposa comes onstage half-dressed and begins a long monologue by lamenting the effects of Love’s weapon. She desperately cries out, “¡Detente un poco, pastor! / ¡Espera, détente, aguarda! / Ladrón y homicida fuiste / que me me robaste y me matas” (187), and swears she will not rest nor leave any stone unturned until she finds him. The second half of her monologue takes place after a long search, although there is no indication that the actress ever leaves the stage. Esposa explains that she has unsuccessfully searched high and low, through valleys, mountains, groves, and thickets. She has even suffered at the hands of foresters, who stripped her of her clothing, stole her staff, purse, hood, and sling, and even cruelly beat her. This allusion to sexual violence might very well have resonated with some members of the religious community, since the only options available to early modern rape victims were death, marriage to their rapist, or ingress into a convent. Notwithstanding all this mistreatment, Esposa declares that she most regrets “el tiempo que me ocupaban / de buscar a mi Pastor” (187). She continues her search, and after some time has passed, Esposo and Amor reappear in time to hear the shepherdess’s heartfelt plea. Not realizing that her beloved is present, she wonders aloud when she will see him again, and admits “Grosera, Señor, anduve, / pero bástele a mi amor / por pena la que le ha dado / el no haber halládoos hoy” (188). Amor, Esposo, and Esposa all rejoice as the lovers are reunited.

The shepherdess asks her partner for forgiveness for her original offense against him, which he immediately grants, and the two declare their sincere love for one another. Esposo proclaims “¡Qué rico estoy contigo!” (188) and in response, Esposa declares “Mi

bien, esclava vuestra / quiero ser desde hoy” (189). This example is a perfect illustration of when “feminine values penetrate and undermine the masculine systems that contain them” (Showalter, “Toward” 131). While official doctrine teaches that Christ has no need of the individual, especially the woman, Sor Cecilia’s character expresses joy and enrichment when joined with his bride. Neither is content or fulfilled without the other. The bridegroom gives his bride a ring, given “por la espina y el clavo” (189), which forever seals their loving union and metonymically foreshadows Christ’s later suffering and crucifixion.

Clearly, the play could not function without its two male characters, Esposo (the divine bridegroom) and Amor (God’s divine love). They come on stage before Esposa (the bride of Christ), the lone female character, carry the burden of reciting the great majority of the lines, and have the final word. On the surface, it may appear as though Sor Cecilia’s drama reflects an internalization of the institutional marginalization of women reinforced by the Catholic Church. Despite the playwright’s undeniable privileging of the two male characters over the one female character, however, Sor Cecilia’s characterization, in certain regards, is not as straightforward as it seems. For one, the male characters that appear here are divine, and therefore not subject to the downfalls of mortal man. As did Sor Marcela, Sor Cecilia holds up only divine male figures as exemplary.³¹ I would argue that this evidences a complete trust in the divine, to which the nuns could directly and intimately connect as expressed in the mystical tradition, as well as in their own ability to access it. It is telling that Esposa, representative here of the nuns participating in the theatrical spectacle, can access the

³¹ Those of Sor Marcela’s male characters who do not represent divine figures are either obviously and deeply flawed, as is *Apetito* in *La muerte del apetito*, or silent and at the bidding of the female characters, as are *Conocimiento Propio* and *Propio Desprecio* in *El celo indiscreto*.

Bridegroom directly by means of Divine Love. Earthly, ecclesiastical, male intercessors are not necessary for salvation. Women can foment a direct connection with Christ, thus assuring their eventual redemption from sin. As Vollendorf insists, this was a way of “[v]alidating women’s communities and spirituality,” since nuns such as Sor Cecilia “wrote texts that represent sophisticated responses to secular and religious traditions that treated women as inferior to men” (117). Eposa does not require an intermediary figure in order to foment a loving relationship with the Bridegroom, other than that of Amor, himself an extension of the Esposo character. This type of assertion that women had direct access to the divine is evidence of exactly what made ecclesiastical officials nervous about the mystical tradition, and manifests a progressive confidence in the spirituality and importance of women both within the structure of the church and in relation to Christ himself.

Additionally, the performance of the piece itself problematizes its characterization. Although Amor and Esposo are male, they must be played exclusively by women because of the restrictions of the convent. This gender layering is not insignificant. In opposition to Elizabethan theater, in which cross-gender casting was not only normative but compulsory, Iberian and Catholic officials considered cross-dressing to be a much worse sin than allowing women on stage.³² Oftentimes, actresses would cross-dress for their roles as *mujeres varoniles*, but they always returned to their original female characterization by the play’s end, as explained in the first chapter. Even though these characters masqueraded as men during the play, it was understood that they were

³² Because it was widely assumed that stage players were completely lacking in moral character, due to the very nature of their profession, most people considered actresses to be on par with prostitutes. Appearing onstage immediately labeled them as loose women, and it often did hold true that many of them were involved in extramarital relationships with playwrights and other actors.

elementally female. The convent stage, then, was the only instance in early modern Iberia of women playing men, and not only did the nuns act as male characters, they went so far as to play Christ himself, albeit in allegorical form. Only here within the confines of the convent could these female religious act without fear of a loss of honor, as well as take on the roles of divine figures that otherwise would have been strictly off-limits to them.

Cross-gender casting evidences that this particular women's space is one "that is simultaneously central and marginal (and purely neither at the same time), a difficult and risky place on the edge, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, with perils but also with new possibilities" (Soja 97). The convent was central to both Spanish society and Catholicism, but was simultaneously marginal in its liminality. It functioned as a fundamental and indispensable element of gender control in early modern Iberia as well as a refuge from societal and cultural pressures. Unquestionably, many women felt drawn to the meditative and secluded lifestyle of the cloistered convent, whether for spiritual reasons or for opportunities for education and creative expression not allowed them *extramuros*. Nevertheless, the convent also served as a repository for poor, illegitimate, dishonored, and unruly women who needed to be controlled and contained in order to preserve familial and societal honor. Whatever their motivations for ingress into the convent, however, only here could such a unique community of women not only survive, but thrive.

Once again, the influence of space on the performance of these plays becomes apparent. Lefebvre makes this clear when he writes that different forms of art hold inherent meaning. He explains that "Among non-verbal signifying sets must be included music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and certainly theatre, which in addition to a text

or pretext embraces gesture, masks, costume, a stage, a *mise-en-scène* — in short, a space” (62). According to Lefebvre’s reasoning, then, not only does theater occur within a space, but also creates its own space within itself. This “*mise-en-scène*,” perhaps more aptly termed ‘metaspace,’ undermines traditional notions of masculinity by allowing women to usurp Esposo and Amor’s roles as stand-ins for Christ. Here it is not a man who functions as savior and redeemer, but rather a woman usurping a traditionally masculine role, attesting to the argument that “Living in environments that validated their intellectual and spiritual capacities, female religious often infused their texts with a sense of confidence and investment in women’s endeavors” (Vollendorf 97). This indicates that we can study “literature as a social institution, embedded not only within its own literary traditions but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes,” as Kolodny argues in her article “Dancing through the Minefield” (147). In other words, Sor María and Sor Cecilia’s fictional work reflects the very real world in which they lived, as well as their struggle against hegemonic powers determined to control and subjugate them. In this sense, the physical place of the convent — with its walls, windows, bars, doors, and locks — as well as the rites and rituals that took place there — such as Mass, singing, meditation, self-negation, and prayer — enclosed and imposed themselves on the literary tradition that flourished *intramuros*. The convent space simultaneously freed women to become subjects rather than objects, and obliged them to take on masculine roles that the Catholic Church and the Inquisition otherwise would not only have considered wildly inappropriate, but worthy of official censure or worse. In a sense, physical and cultural (or mental, to use Kolodny’s word) restrictions and limitations allowed for, and even encouraged, autonomy and freedom.

As far as the physical parameters of the convent are concerned, we know that Sor María, Sor Cecilia, and their contemporaries performed these plays either in the *sala de recreo* or in the *huerta* of the Concepción del Carmen convent. Both spaces remain largely unchanged.³³ The *huerta* is very large and accommodating, and the nuns still use it for theatrical performances when the weather permits. Here the Discalced Carmelites currently grow flowers, fruit, and vegetables, and a large bush, said to be planted by Saint Teresa herself, occupies one corner of the garden. This space would have provided the nuns with plenty of room to construct a manger, a hut, or any other piece of scenery necessary to stage their drama.

By contrast, the *sala de recreo* is a very small room with wooden floors, sparsely populated with a few chairs lined up against the walls, and capable of accommodating a limited number of people. The size of the room did not, however, impede the staging of Sor María or Sor Cecilia's works in any way. When she founded this and other convents, Saint Teresa imposed a strict limit on the number of nuns allowed to live in each one. No more than twenty-one women could inhabit a convent at any given time, a rule dutifully followed even today.³⁴ Therefore, the *sala* provided just enough room for a few actors, a minimal set, and a small audience. The sister playwrights limited the number of characters in their plays by necessity. Sor María's *Fiestecilla del nacimiento* requires the most actors, with two singing nuns, four virtues, and a devil. This means that while seven women actively participated as players, fourteen or less would have been in attendance. Sor Cecilia's *Fiestecilla para una profesión religiosa* required only three players — the

³³ Although outsiders are not permitted to enter the convent due to the strict rules of the cloister, one of the eleven nuns currently living in the convent, María Capilla de Jesús, was kind enough to provide me with photographs of many of the convent spaces, particularly the *sala* and the *huerta*.

³⁴ There are currently eleven nuns residing in Sor María and Sor Cecilia's convent in Valladolid.

Bridegroom, Divine Love, and the shepherdess —³⁵ leaving nineteen women in attendance. By comparison, a typical *comedia* of the time period usually calls for a minimum of ten actors, and can include upwards of thirty characters. The technical aspects of the plays themselves represent both the restricted theatrical space and the limited number of women inhabiting the convent. Thus we see that although “an already produced space can be decoded, can be *read*” (Lefebvre 17), it is not produced to be read, “but rather in order to be *lived* by people with bodies and lives” (Lefebvre 143). The creation and performance of these texts necessarily and inescapably depended on the physical realities and spatial practices of the convent, or rather on the “bodies and lives” of the women living *intramuros*.

The convent space in which the two sisters lived, worked, and worshipped was uniquely suitable for the creation and fomentation of a singular tradition of women’s writing and education, since “For many, to be a nun was to be both a teacher and a learner” (Vollendorf 179). Sor María and Sor Cecilia’s dramatic works evidence this through privileging female characters, promoting the mystic tradition, and emphasizing the Virgin Mary’s central role in the life and mission of Jesus Christ. As Gillian Rose explains,

The subject of feminism, then, depends on a paradoxical geography in order to acknowledge both the power of hegemonic discourses and to insist on the possibility of resistance. This geography describes that subjectivity as that of both prisoner and exile; it allows the subject of feminism to occupy both the centre and the margin, the inside and the outside. (qtd. in Soja 124)

The “paradoxical geography” of the convent reveals not only hegemony and resistance, but in this case reveals a strong tradition of women writers, learners, and educators, as

³⁵ Depending on the version of the *fiestecilla* performed, the addition of another shepherdess would call for four players altogether.

well. The dramatic works of these two sisters evidence the influence of their biological mother, Cecilia Morillas, and their two spiritual mothers, Saint Teresa of Ávila and the Virgin Mary. Due to the effect these foremothers had on them, “Each sister created from a woman-centered world view” (Arenal and Schlau 136) in which the spiritual triumphs over the physical, mothers play an essential role in the salvation of mankind, and women directly access the divine. Only in the simultaneously restrictive and freeing convent space could such a powerful tradition flourish and allow these nun playwrights to influence and inspire those around them as well as generations of women to come.

CHAPTER III

A Rose by Any Other Name: Maria do Ceo's Virgin Mary and the Male Gaze

“I cannot urge you too strongly to a meditation on optics.”
Jacques Lacan

Unlike Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento and Sor María de San Alberto, we know very few biographical facts about Sor Maria do Ceo,³⁶ despite her long life and literary prowess. We know that she wrote the biography of one of the other nuns in her convent, but if someone wrote a similar life story for Sor Maria, it no longer exists. Born along with her twin sister on September 11, 1658³⁷ to an aristocratic family, she was the daughter of Dona Catherina de Tavora and Antonio Deça.³⁸ She was baptized in the Senhora dos Mártires parish.³⁹ Frei António do Sacramento notes that she was both well-educated and religiously devout, devoting herself both to “a leitura dos livros” as well as “modestia, e virtude” (qtd. in Hatherly, “Biografia” xv). Her intellect and studious nature also impressed the author of the book chronicling the founding of her convent, who

³⁶ In the prologue of her *Triunfo do Rosario*, her name is listed as Soror Maria do Ceo. Modern Portuguese requires a different spelling, which is Maria do Céu.

³⁷ Although most sources cite 1658 as her birth year, a death announcement published in the *Gazeta de Lisboa* in 1753 lists the year of her birth as 1657. Ana Hatherly suggests that this was most likely nothing more than a “lapso de revisão” (“Biografia” xv).

³⁸ In his *Historia Serafica da Ordem de S. Francisco*, Frei António do Sacramento spells Maria's mother's name as Catharina rather than Catherina, and her father's last name as d'Eça rather than Deça. The author of the *Livro da fundação, ampliação & Sitio do Convento de N. Senhora da Piedade da Esperança* lists her father's name as Antonio de Sâ e Castro.

³⁹ This parish is located in Lisbon, which seems to indicate that Sor Maria was born in Portugal's capital city.

points out, “chamavaa superior instinto a empregos discretos, emtertendose em ler, e em estudar, e exercitandose em obras poeticas” (qtd. in Hatherly, “Biografia” xvi). She took her vows at a young age as the result of a sincerely felt call to religious life.⁴⁰ She lived and worked in the Franciscan Mosteiro da Esperança⁴¹ in Lisbon, Portugal, and was a devoted and model nun, serving twice as Abbess, once as *Porteira* and once as *Mestra de Noviças*. Fray António do Sacramento notes that after fulfilling her duties to the convent, as well as her religious duties, “ocupava o restante tempo na lição dos livros, em que se fez summamente eruditta” (qtd. in Hatherly, “Biografia” xviii). Her continued intellectual and literary pursuits in the convent included authoring several plays, including a set dedicated to the Catholic saint San Alejo.⁴² Hatherly points out that Sor Maria’s plays “destinaram-se originalmente apenas à instrução das religiosas do seu Mosteiro” (“Biografia” xi), and therefore she strongly opposed the idea of sharing them with people outside of the convent. Nevertheless, “No entanto, numa época como aquela em que viveu, tanto pela sua ascendência como pela fama do seu talent, nem sequer uma freira exemplar como Sórora Maria do Céu pôde furtar-se completamente ao contacto com o mundo” (xi-xii). This contact with the outside world also manifested itself in the form of her friendship and correspondence with Dona Teresa de Moncada, the duchess of the

⁴⁰ Historical accounts differ on when Sor Maria took her vows. Some indicate she was sixteen, while others insist she was eighteen.

⁴¹ This convent is also known unofficially by the name Mosteiro da Nossa Senhora da Esperança, and currently houses a fire station. Although it has been drastically altered to suit its new purpose, tiles original to the convent still adorn some of the interior walls. Some of the items from the convent are now displayed as part of an extensive collection of antique art and objects in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, which also used to be a convent. Hatherly notes that this particular convent was meant for “senhoras da mais elevada estirpe” (“Biografia” xii).

⁴² Some of her works, including *A Feniz Aparecida na Vida, Morte, Sepultura, & Milagre da Gloriosa S. Catharina* (1715), *A Preciosa*, *Allegoria Moral* (1731), *A Preciosa*, *Obras de Misericordia* (1733) were published under the pseudonym Marina Clemência. Ana Hatherly discusses the use of this pseudonym at length in the introduction to her edition of *A Preciosa*.

House of Medinaceli, and her daughter, Doña María del Rosario. Her *Obras varias y admirables de la Madre María do Ceo* were published in 1744, presumably reluctantly, and dedicated to the Duchess of Medinaceli. Sor Maria died at the age of ninety-four on May 28, 1753.⁴³

This chapter focuses on six of the plays written by Sor Maria do Céu. Although we know she wrote at least nine plays,⁴⁴ here I examine *Clavel, y Rosa*, and her collection of *autos*, titled *Triunfo do Rosario*, which was published in 1740.⁴⁵ This collection includes *La flor de las finezas*, *Rosal de Maria*, *Perla, y Rosa*, *Las rosas con las espigas*, and *Trez redenciones del Hombre*. As is the case with other convent dramas, Ana Hatherly points out, “não consta que alguma vez tenham sido representadas no nosso século, nem tão pouco comentadas (ou até talvez lidas) pela maior parte dos estudiosos da literature portuguesa” (“Prefácio” 5-6). She goes on to argue that this oversight is due to the fact that most Portuguese playwrights during the Baroque period wrote in Spanish or Latin, and because we know very little about its staging. Portuguese scholars tend to ignore works written in Spanish, and Spanish scholars generally consider literature from Portugal to be outside the scope of their studies.

I would add that, in general, convent plays are not recognized as an integral part of the larger phenomenon of Iberian theater, most likely due to their religious nature and limited audience. Nevertheless, Hatherly recognizes the importance of Maria do Ceo’s

⁴³ Although Mendes dos Remédios indicates 1753 as the year of her death, Inocência da Silva, Garcia Peres, and Barbosa Machado list it as 1752. Also, the *Gazeta de Lisboa* lists the date as the 18th of May, rather than the 28th, which Ana Hatherly suggests could simply be a typographical error.

⁴⁴ These plays are available in the National Library in Lisbon, and were all published during the first half of the seventeenth century.

⁴⁵ The unidentified author of the prologue insists that Sor Maria did not wish for her works to be published, but that as time went on, the other nuns were desirous that such great plays not be lost, describing them as a “thesouro escondido no campo” (2).

theater in the larger performance tradition, arguing that it could be considered “uma espécie de epitome desse fim de época do Barroco português na sua vertente contrarreformista, culminância tardia dum estilo e duma maneira de conceber o mundo que iriam em breve ser destronados pela implantação das novas tendências racionalistas” (“Prólogo” 5). Hatherly also explains that she translated *Triunfo do Rosário* from the original Spanish into Portuguese⁴⁶ to call attention not only to Maria do Ceo, but to Portuguese theater in general, insisting the collection of *autos* forms part of the Spanish theatrical tradition as well.

In an attempt to underscore the “criatividade esplêndida” of Sor Maria, here I examine her works in the hopes of encouraging other scholars to consider them as integral to “[uma] herança cultural que nos compete estimar e defender” (Hatherly “Prólogo” 7). I utilize Laura Mulvey’s feminist study of the male gaze in film, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, and Barbara Freedman’s work considering the same concept in Shakespeare, *Staging the Gaze*, as a way to approach Sor Maria’s plays. Jacques Lacan’s concept of the male gaze serves as a springboard for Mulvey’s analysis of cinematography, as she considers his ideas through a feminist lens. She focuses on the voyeurism promoted by the camera, used not only to film the action, but also to direct and inform the gaze of the public, as well. Although Mulvey dedicates her feminist studies to the cinematic, much of her theory is applicable to theater.

Oftentimes in theater, as in the cinema, “the image of woman says little or nothing about women’s reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy” (Mulvey xiii). This fantasy leads to “scopophilia” (16), which Mulvey identifies the pleasure derived from looking at

⁴⁶ Hatherly’s Portuguese translation of these plays is the only modern edition currently available. A Spanish edition based on the original texts is forthcoming, thanks to Valerie Hegstrom.

an object. In other words, it references “using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (18). Freedman, in turn, focuses on theater, specifically plays by Shakespeare. Her definition of the term “theatrical” is especially apropos to my argument, since she determines that something or someone is theatrical if “such a person is aware that she is seen, reflects that awareness, and so deflects our look” (1). A theatrical play, then, makes the audience aware of their own spectatorship through misrecognition. I posit that Sor Maria’s plays accomplish this by presenting the audience with a familiar figure, the Virgin Mary, in an unfamiliar way. By way of a kind of defamiliarization, the author presents the Virgin in a Brechtian manner that “leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer” (Brecht 91). Sor Maria’s plays utilize this sense of theatricality and usurp the male gaze in order to create strong female protagonists. I argue that in Sor Maria’s drama, the playwright creates just such a protagonist by inverting the traditional male gaze and turning it on itself, thereby recovering a medieval tradition that portrays Mary as assertive and active.

Although Sor Maria’s *Clavel, y Rosa* does not form part of her collection of *autos*, its characterization of the Virgin Mary makes it a perfect companion piece. In order to fully appreciate the significance of these plays, it is imperative to understand why the playwright utilizes a rose as a symbol for the mother of Christ. Hatherly intimates that they were performed during the celebration of the rosary, which occurred on the seventh day of October as a commemoration of the 1571 Battle of Lepanto.⁴⁷ As is the case with the majority of convent theater, these plays served to simultaneously educate and entertain, and these particular works form part of a long-standing and widespread Portuguese tradition of rosary worship. This tradition, introduced in 1218 by São

⁴⁷ The defeat of the Turks was supposedly due to the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Domingos de Gusmão and connected to the Dominican order, reportedly began when Mary herself gave São Domingos a rosary to represent her life intertwined with that of Christ.⁴⁸ Fray Luís de Sousa explains that the Latin “Rosario” becomes “Rosal” in Portuguese, and that the rose is the most logical choice to represent the Virgin. He argues that it is the most noble of all flowers “por fineza da côr, por excellencia do cheiro, por utilidade da virtude: alegra a vista, deleita o olfacto, conforta o coração; e he conservadora da vida humana, . . . com o oleo em infusão, com a sustancia em conserva.” He goes on to add the rose’s thorns to its positive qualities, since their power to protect the flower from harm makes them a symbol of “honestidade, e vergonha virginal” (qtd. in Hatherly, “Culto” 27). They also allude to the crucifixion of Christ, thereby intimately connecting Mary to him.

While the rosary itself points metonymically to the Virgin Mary, the practice of praying the rosary informs both the theme and structure of Sor Maria’s plays. The rosary was made up of one hundred and fifty beads used to pray both the “Hail Mary” and the “Our Father” prayers, as well as to meditate upon the fifteen “Mysteries of the Rosary.”⁴⁹ These “mysteries” are divided into three groups, and a different color rose represents each group. The joyful mysteries correspond to white roses, the sorrowful mysteries to red roses, and the glorious mysteries to yellow or golden roses, as we see in *Rosal de Maria*. Sor Maria utilizes the traditional symbolism of the Rosary in many of her works, true to the aims of convent theater as both *dulce et utile*. The popularity of the Rosary

⁴⁸ Fray Luís de Sousa specifies that the rosary stands for “sua santa vida, seus trabalhos e glórias de mistura com a vida, e morte, e paixão, e gloriosa Resurreição de Nosso Redentor” (qtd. in Hatherly, “Culto” 27).

⁴⁹ These are the traditional sets of mysteries as designated by Pope St. Pius V in the 16th century. Pope John Paul II announced five new optional mysteries in 2002. These are known as the luminous mysteries, and bring the total number of mysteries to twenty rather than fifteen.

tradition helped to make the Virgin Mary an important figure in early modern Iberia, especially as a prescriptive example of behavior for women.

According to Catholic tradition, Mary was, like Christ himself, the product of an immaculate conception. Her most important role, of course, was that of mother, but the Catholic Church also maintained that “Mary’s body . . . had retained its virginal purity throughout her life, while she herself had never sinned in thought or act.” (Ellington 106). Thus Mary came to represent the impeccable, albeit impossible, standard of purity and duty for women. They should be both virgins and mothers, both human and divine. Valerie Hegstrom notes that Mary is a problematic personage, one that plays into “the unfair and unrealistic casting of female characters into the two dichotomous roles, Eve or Mary, sinner or saint. For ‘resisting’ readers, both models are undesirable, but Mary’s example is particularly oppressive because of its coercive nature in the lives of real women” (3). This projection of male expectations onto female subjects is, of course, part and parcel with the male gaze. What is more, the Council of Trent drastically changed the official portrayal of Mary, converting her from an active, essential figure, to that of a passive, auxiliary one.

In *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Donna Spivey Ellington explains that during the medieval period, artists often included Mary in images of the trinity, and portrayed her as parallel to Jesus, albeit on a lower level than God the father. Medieval theologians also continually emphasized her essential role “as the provider of Christ’s Eucharistic body and blood in prayers, literary works, and in sermons” (137). Although Christ himself was “the supreme sacrament,” it was only “through Mary that Christ’s Incarnation, and the whole

sacramental system that flowed from it, became possible” (141). Her role as intercessor and mother was emphasized above all else. Nowhere did this concept carry more weight than in the convent. In point of fact, Asunción Lavrin explains that,

Since the late Middle Ages[,] Mary, as Queen of Heaven, was considered humankind’s universal protector and intercessor before her son. She answered their prayers and appeared to visionaries not only as mediator but as the center of strong Mariological devotion. Mary was the fixed star around which the lives of her professed daughters revolved. (104)

Nevertheless, this interpretation of the mother of Christ suffered a drastic reevaluation during the early modern period. Rather than underscore her role as wife and mother, her life-long virginity became tantamount to all else, particularly once ecclesiastical leaders determined that virginity was more highly prized than marriage. Theologians began to hold her up “as a model of the virgin life” (Ellington 144), arguing that her existence was contemplative, enclosed, pious, and private. Ellington also points out that the sixteenth-century Virgin was “humble, quiet, passive, and submissive, obedient always to the will of God. This obedience was proclaimed to be her greatest source of blessing, greater even than her motherhood of Christ” (142). Thus, the intercessory, life-giving Virgin of the late Middle Ages became a quiet, passive exemplar after the Council of Trent. Sor Maria’s dramatic works do indeed frame Mary as exemplar, but emphasize the power, agency, and subjectivity inherent in her roles as wife, mother, and intercessor. These roles allow her to effectively escape the male gaze, thereby recovering the Medieval Marian tradition in order to set a new example for the nun spectators of these plays.

This is evident in *Clavel, y Rosa*. Rather than allowing the male gaze to project its fantasy onto a female figure, Sor Maria allows her protagonist to usurp this gaze and objectify the male characters in intriguing ways. In this play, the playwright introduces

the spectators to a cast of allegorical characters. A young Mary, appearing as the character Rosa, must choose a husband from a number of qualified suitors, each represented by a type of flower. These suitors are Lyrio (iris), Clavel (carnation), Narciso (daffodil), and Bien-me-quiere (daisy). The playwright utilizes the popular trope of Mary as rose to metonymically create this unique cast and to employ the anthropomorphization of flowers as a means of characterization. The plot is simple. Each floral suitor presents himself to the bride-to-be in the hopes of wooing her, touting his unique characteristics and boldly stating why she should choose him. With Mosqueta (rose hip or sweet briar) as her mediator, she interacts with each candidate individually as she candidly uncovers and expounds upon their flaws and faults. Although each flower clearly believes himself to be Rosa's ideal mate, she systematically rejects each one. When, at last, Clavel presents himself to her, his humility and unpretentious self-effacement not only impress her, but ultimately win her over, and she chooses him to be her husband.

As with Sor Marcela de San Félix, Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento, and Sor María de San Alberto's plays, this dramatic work also reflects the convent space in which it was written and performed, since, as Lefebvre points out, "the pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, his competence and performance" (57). Remembering that space is both place and practice, Sor Maria do Ceo's works must necessarily reflect the monastic experience. As the play opens, Rosa explains that she submits to her father's will by choosing a husband, since she would rather "ser adorno del Templo / . . . que en el Vergel / Desposorio" (30-32). The playwright indirectly references both cloistered,

religious life as a vocation and the Catholic notion, based on Paul's admonition,⁵⁰ that a celibate life spent in the service of God is superior to marriage. Mosqueta, charged with announcing the upcoming nuptials, asks about Rosa and her future husband. This inquiry affords the protagonist an opportunity not only to expound upon her own qualities, but to set herself up as superior to all other flowers. She declares that not one of the blooms in the garden can compare to her perfection, explaining, "no pudieran / De la Azucena la tez / De la Violeta el olor / Del Jazmín la candidez / Del Lirio la gravedad / La hermosura del Clavel / Lo celeste del Jacinto / Y de la Angélica es ser, / O finalmente de todas / Lo mejor, era poner / Un imposible a imitarlas" (74-84). She lists each one with an accompanying attribute in order to reveal their unsuccessful attempts to equal her in beauty and character.

As she lists her competitors, she utilizes the same tactics employed by men to look at and objectify women. The two-dimensionality of the characters and the allegorical nature of the play facilitate Rosa's objectification and simplification of the flowers. Each can only possess one quality. She reduces Violeta to scent, limits Clavel to beauty, and confines Jazmin to naivety. She also throws off the conventional convent tactic of emphasizing humility, choosing instead to tout her considerable gifts, pointing out that she is "Maravilla con la flor, / Y deidad con la muger" (90-91). She invokes her essential role in the salvation of mankind by not only placing herself on par with Christ, but even replacing him as the destroyer of that evil serpent that invaded the Garden of

⁵⁰ In 1 Corinthians, verses 8 and 9, Paul states, "I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." This was interpreted by the Catholic Church as a case for celibacy and, in turn, monastic life.

Eden and tempted Adam and Eve. She explains, “aunque en flores tal vez / Se esconde el Aspid, mi planta / Ha pizado sua altivez, / Y pudo una flor aqui / A una serpiente vencer” (95-99). The playwright also invokes the *mujer esquivada* trope by having Rosa show Clavel, Zefiro, Albor, and Rosicler “Aquel desden, que es decoro, / Sin dexar de ser desden” (108-109). She announces herself to be the “Reyna suya quantas flores / Nascen a ser” (116-117), which flowers reflect human attributes in order to indirectly and metaphorically deal with issues so sacred that “al tocarlas hade ser / Por sombras, ò por enigmas” (129-130). Thus, she refers to God as “el Divino Sol” (134) when explaining that this divine figure has gathered the most illustrious flowers together in order for her to choose her mate from among them. In an obvious inversion of traditional views on love and marriage, the woman chooses from among a select group of men, rather than waiting to be chosen and wooed by her beloved.

Intriguingly, although Rosa’s position as quasi-deity permits her to live “Sin prezuncion de muger” (155), she submits to her father’s will that she marry, despite the fact that this decree scares her, and she finds herself vacillating “Entre el genio, y el respeto, / Entre izencion, y poder” (158-59) before eventually assenting. Although she acquiesces to volition not her own, Sor Maria makes it clear that Rosa indeed has a choice. She agrees to marry out of respect and obedience, and her use of the reflexive phrase “me sugeté” (165) indicates that Rosa is not forcefully subjected to her father’s will, but rather subjects herself to it. What is more, the protagonist emphasizes that the Marian figure will preserve her immaculate purity and virtue despite her decision to marry. In other words, she alone is in control of her moral, mental, and physical states.

After Rosa proclaims her independence and asserts her power, her suitors enter the stage, and the stage directions note, “*Salen las flores galanes.*” Their physical appearance is of utmost importance in the play, and this emphasis on physical beauty is an inversion of traditional portrayal of women by male authors, identified by either their attractiveness or their sexual purity, as Barbara Mujica has noted. As each suitor presents himself, his physical appearance, metonymically connected to the flower he represents, creates a direct correlation to his character flaws, as when Lyrio identifies himself as “El Lyrio Arrogante” (195). Although Rosa’s many suitors comment on her beauty as they vie for her hand, she turns their gaze back onto them in order to reveal their shortcomings.

In point of fact, Sor Maria often references seeing and looking, as when Rosa declares, “no es bien, / Que quien me *mira* me ignore, / y me esconda a quien me *ve*” (49-51; my emphasis), or “Tan sola, y clara se *ve*, / Que la *miran* como una, / Y la adoran como en tres” (61-63; my emphasis). Lyrio basks in the gaze of others, as he insists that he is “El mayor entre las flores; / Ansi que todas me *ven* / Principe, pues de los valles” (199-201; my emphasis). Narciso, for his part, also portrays himself as an object of the gaze, noting, “como en mi *se ve* / Hermosura, y gracia, espero / Ser preferido” (210-12; my emphasis). He then blatantly projects his own image onto Rosa, and his insistence that “Cierto es que ama cada uno / Su semejante” (257) reinforces Mulvey’s assertion that “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Sor Maria’s protagonist, however, does not allow herself to be objectified in this way as she incredulously asks, “Vos mi semejante sois?” (215). When Narciso answers in the affirmative, Rosa proudly declares, “yo semejante no tuve, / ni

tengo, ni hede tener” (217-18). The other flowers mock this suitor’s attempt at wooing the beautiful bride, and Mosqueta even invokes Narciso’s act of looking and turns it on itself by calling up the image of a mirror, saying “Vaya-se el bobo al espejo, / Y lindo se mire en él” (223-24). Rosa’s rejection of Narciso forces his gaze to double back upon itself,⁵¹ finding its only appropriate expression in self-absorbed self-reflection.

The next flower to present himself is the Bien-me-quiere, who self-identifies as “La flor del amor” (227). When Rosa asks him what merit he possesses, he pompously declares that he does not embody or represent love, but rather that he *is* love, the only true merit. He is immediately dismissed as the protagonist insists that “adorar sin pretender” (234) is better than what he offers. Rosa does not even give the other flowers a chance at wooing her, but rather asks Mosqueta to identify the one who hangs back from the others. Mosqueta identifies him as “El Clavel, / Principe, que es de la sangre, / Y aun aspirante a ser Rey” (238-40) and assumes him to be a “Galan vergoncozo / Que ama sin dexarse ver” (243-44). Again the playwright emphasizes the function of sight. Not only does Clavel not wish to be seen, but by hiding behind the other flowers he also keeps himself from seeing his beloved. Thus, he avoids objectifying or “styling” her according to his own desires. Clavel’s refusal to see and be seen is in stark contrast with the behavior of his counterparts, and it soon becomes apparent to both the protagonist and the audience that while most of the male characters are vainglorious, pompous, and silly, only he, the most humble of the flowers, proves worthy of Rosa’s attention.

When Rosa questions her shy suitor as to why he does not approach despite his amorous intentions, he explains that respect makes him keep his distance even while faith

⁵¹ Narciso’s name, of course, comes from the classical mythical figure of Narcissus, who drowned while gazing upon his own reflection.

impels him forward. This offers Sor Maria more opportunities to reference sight. The protagonist asks him if he does not *see* this as a contradiction, to which he responds that fear, more than hope, is *seen* in his humility. She accuses him of cowardice and asks him what merits he possesses. He proclaims that he possesses but one: “Solo meresco em mirar / Que no llego a merecer” (265-66). Clavel’s gaze ultimately does not rest on Rosa, but rather on his own insufficiency. If, as Mulvey suggests, scopophilia is narcissistic and therefore helps constitute the ego, then Clavel’s abject humility is indicative of his unwillingness to use Rosa “as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (18). Rosa, on the other hand, indicates her inclination to use sight as a way of judging between the suitors. When she asks them all to appear before her the next day, promising a reward to the first to arrive, an aside reveals her true motivation. She explains, “Quiero ver en esta accion, / Qual màs atento se ve, / Y si se adelanta a todos, / Como en lo màs, el Clavel” (287-90). Clavel decides to stay the night in that very spot in order to be the first one Rosa sees, thereby willingly subjecting himself to her gaze. The last line of his monologue is telling: “Duerman los ojos, que el coraçon vela” (322). Thus, he once more relinquishes the power of sight as a sign of humility before someone he recognizes as superior to himself.

Once morning has come, Clavel’s second monologue indicates that “There are circumstances in which . . . there is pleasure in being looked at” (Mulvey 16), as he hopefully proclaims, “Ella me mirarà, si la fortuna, / Me levanta màs alto que la Luna” (355-56). Her gaze will not subjugate Clavel, but rather elevate him to heights previously unknown. The other suitors, however do not share in this hope, since each arrives later than their rival. Bien-me-quiere explains that he has arrived tardy because he was

gathering pearls from the dawn for his beloved, while Narciso was detained by his desire to look his best for Rosa. The protagonist rejects the pearls in favor of promptness and abhors Narciso's self-interest, which he lamely attempts to present as service to his beloved. Lyrio also arrives too late, unable to appear until the sun has risen. Only Clavel, who actually never left, 'arrived' early enough to please Rosa, who declares in an aside, "En todo el Clavel se mira / A los de màs superior" (427-28). Again, she utilizes her sight to reveal him as superior to his competitors.

The second act begins with a long monologue by Clavel, in which he makes clear reference to the male gaze when he states, "beldad de tal ser / Magestad tan soberana / Nó hade mirar como humana, / Aunque esté como muger" (507-10). The gaze has no power here in the presence of female divinity. Girassol describes her as "una hija del Sol, . . . una luz pura, / Que està quazi deidad, y es creatura, / A quien mortal ninguno se halla digno" (567-69). The idea of Mary as divinity is not new to Sor Maria's drama, since "late medieval preachers spoke of Mary's assumption and her position as Queen of Heaven and Mediatrix" (Ellington 103). This concept of female divinity continually resurfaces throughout the play, most often when Rosa reminds her suitors of their necessary subjugation to her. These reminders color utterances such as Clavel's "Soy vuestro esclavo" (654). What is traditionally a customary courtly phrase used to show respect becomes quite literal. He is, indeed, subject to her and her will, as all earthly creatures are bound to serve and obey their deity. Although the treatment of Maria may not be unique to this particular dramatic work, the convent space allows for unique portrayal of her power and authority as exercised over a group of men, not women. It must have been satisfying for the nuns in attendance to be able to mentally align

themselves with the Marian figure by virtue of their sex, especially within a space such as the convent, which is “both oppressive and enabling, filled not only with authoritarian perils but also with possibilities for community, resistance, and emancipatory change” (Soja 87).

In this play, the object of the gaze “is aware that she is seen, reflects that awareness, and so deflects our look” (Freedman 1). By allowing Rosa to appropriate the gaze, the playwright creates a powerful female figure that upends the “active/male and passive/female” dichotomy (Mulvey 19), and thereby breaks from more traditional models. Whereas other texts, including the Bible, portray the Virgin Mary as meek and submissive,⁵² Sor Maria’s work reclaims a medieval version of Mary that portrays her as a strong, powerful, commanding presence that demands the respect of the male characters. Ellington points out that during the late Middle Ages, “As Queen of Heaven after her Assumption, Mary was always portrayed as continuing the same close relationship with Jesus that she had enjoyed on earth, sitting at his right hand and ruling over the kingdom of Mercy as he administered the kingdom of Justice” (107). This recapturing of a lost tradition of Marian authority reinforces Valerie Hegstrom’s argument that “the nuns who wrote plays created female characters and allegorical figures who exercise control, power, and independence in their roles” (213). Sor Maria’s allegorical Mary does just that.

⁵² In the oft-cited first chapter of Luke, for example, Mary’s role is limited to accepting her lot as the mother of the Christ child and she speaks only three times in order to affirm her humility and submission, despite her misgivings. She first responds to the angel Gabriel’s announcement by asking, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (verse 34), and then acquiesces to his command by saying, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (verse 38). Her third speech, in response to her cousin, functions only to echo Elisabeth’s praise of both her and Mary’s miraculous conceptions.

In this play, the playwright showcases the upending of the traditional active/passive dichotomy and the reinstating of Marian control and power when Rosa allows all of her suitors the chance to explain themselves, and in unison they meekly respond, “A vuestras plantas / prostrados la permission / Agradecemos rendidos” (727-29). Predictably, the suitors do not do themselves any favors here. Lyrio begins by explaining how he has toned down his greatness in favor of love. Next, Narciso argues that he deserves Rosa’s favor because he gave up his prodigious self-love for her sake. Bien-me-quiere, in turn, insists that only his love is true, but misguidedly utilizes the verb “querer” in place of “amar,” something which Clavel pointedly corrects in his rhetorically rich monologue that wins him the title of “victor.” Intriguingly, although Rosa admits that Clavel does, indeed, deserve this honor, she warns him against a repeat of this uppity behavior, saying, “El laurel vuestro será, / Mas advertid desde oy, / Que en mi Palacio otra vez / Por semejante passion / No argumenteis que aunque mas, / Assegure vuestra voz, / Su respeto, ò su pureza, / Adonde prezido yo, / Es opinion mui grossera / Para una hija del Sol” (903-12). She allows him to express his opinion with the express understanding that he will not repeat his actions, and she confidently reminds him of her position of power.

The playwright continues to emphasize the visual in the third act, in which each of the characters shares images seen in dreams the night before. These nocturnal visions reinforce their characterization and rhetoric. When Narciso insists that only Rosa is capable of interpreting these dreams, she counters him by saying, “No podré, / Que nó es justo se examine / Con curiosidad infiel / Del oculto lo sagrado / Antes de dexarse ver” (1018-22). Once again Sor Maria warns against impertinent and improper looking.

Although in this case she refers to the workings of the unconscious mind as well as the sacred, her cautionary counsel could easily apply to the already expressed “curiozidad infiel” of the male characters. Both looking and being looked at are referenced in their reactions to Rosa as she offers one collective interpretation for all of their dreams. Once she expresses that they were an indication of her pending nuptials, Lyrio is sure that he is *seen* as “alentado” (1064), while Narciso and Bien-me-quiere allude to sight by again referencing their dreams. Clavel alone forgoes looking or being looked at as he meekly responds in an aside, “Ò como me temo indigno” (1063). He figuratively lowers his gaze in an expression of humility. Rosa eventually confronts Clavel, asking, “Vos solo nõ haveis soñado?” (1079), to which he responds in the affirmative, but admits he is reluctant to share the images he saw, even though they position him as the preferred suitor.

Eventually Rosa discovers that Clavel is ignorant of his royal heritage, and it is she who imposes his identity upon him. Tellingly, Clavel responds, “quando con vos me miro, / Aunque aqui tanto me honrais / Pareceme que estoy viendo / Un borron junto aun cristal” (1192-95). Although his male gaze imagines Rosa as his partner, it fails to render “woman into an apologist for the phallogocentric system that oppresses her” (134). Rather, it recognizes her role as divine authoritative figure. Although Clavel is indeed a “Principe de la sangre / Conjunto a la Magestad” (1188-89), his gaze only reinforces his inferior position. It is precisely his humility and refusal to employ the male gaze in traditional ways that makes him worthy to be Rosa’s husband. It is essential to note that Sol Divino does appear at the end of the third act as a type of *deus ex machina* in order to make Rosa’s choice official. Nevertheless, his role is seen as a formality, since his

decision merely reflects Rosa's. Her will and agency are indeed the driving forces behind Sol's declaration.

The author continues this strong characterization in her collection of plays, *Triunfo do Rosario*. Admittedly, the Marian figures are inevitably subject to the authority of those characters that represent divinity, such as the king in *A flor das finezas*. This *auto*, the first of the set of five that make up Sor Maria's collection, features an intriguing cast of allegorical characters. Rey, as is to be expected, represents God. This king figure is the father of two *infantas*, Clemencia and Severa. Luzbelo appears before him to argue that Hombre should be punished for his misdeeds, but Clemencia is determined to save the sinner by finding special roses with almost magical properties. She asks Principe and Plebeo for help locating these unique flowers, but each disappoints in turn. Pastor, on the other hand, shows his willingness to assist his beloved Clemencia, and helps Hombre escape his fate. In a sort of final showdown, Hombre and Luzbelo duel in the presence of the king, backed by Angelo and Sombra, respectively. Once Hombre overcomes his opponent, he presents his case in the royal court, assisted by Pastor and with the support of Clemencia. Needless to say, they redeem him from both the clutches of the devil and the wrath of a just God.

As the play begins, the king⁵³ invites his two daughters to join him onstage, and Clemencia enters clutching an olive branch, while Severa carries with her "*las insignias de la Justicia*" (2). In fact, Severa reveals herself to be a *mujer varonil* character⁵⁴ by referencing "la ardiente espada" with which she plans to avenge her father of anyone

⁵³ The stage directions indicate that the king enters on an elevated platform placed on the stage, thereby spatially distinguishing him as the highest authority in the play.

⁵⁴ Although the Severa character is not explored in depth in the play, she is reminiscent of the *varonil* characters that fill Sor Marcela's *coloquios espirituales*.

unlucky enough to put his honor in jeopardy. Even though Severa's characterization certainly demands respect from both the audience and the other characters, it soon becomes clear that Clemencia truly wields the power in the play. In fact, the king himself admits to her, "nò oza a aparecer mi rigor grave / Delante tu presencia, / Porque teme el rigor a la Clemencia; / Y tanta es tu privança, / Que quitas de mi mano espada, y lâca" (3). Nevertheless, the sisters declare their solidarity as they embrace one another and Severa insists, "Una alma conservamos en dos vidas" (4). Clemencia, the allegorical Marian figure, has the ability to overcome her sister, representative of the more severe version of divine justice present in the Old Testament, but they work together rather than against one another.

The next character to enter is the malevolent Luzbelo, who argues that the king must exact justice against the disobedient Hombre, whom he accuses of "Haziendo de tus preceptos / De sus teatros la farça" (9).⁵⁵ Luzbelo declares that the king should turn Hombre over to his care, declaring that he will serve as "El braço de tu vengança" (10). Clemencia exercises her considerable authority for the first time as she demands, "Basta, / Que en presencia del Supremo / Nò se dan voces tan altas" (10). This action foreshadows Clemencia's final stand against Luzbelo towards the end of the play as she advocates for Hombre. Luzbelo even admits his fear of her, stating, "De tu presencia / Ya mi despecho me aparta, / Por nò verte compassiva, / Y por nò verte enojada" (11). Severa also points out that Clemencia is even capable of weakening justice.

When the protagonist descends to earth in search of a special flower that gives forth "frutos de gracia" (14), which will placate the monarch and save man from the

⁵⁵ Sor Maria ironically repeats an oft-repeated notion of the theatre as a breeding ground for immoral behavior. As occurs in other convent plays, moments of self-referentiality such as these serve to lighten the mood of a serious theme by injecting small moments of humor.

consequences of his actions, she meets first with Príncipe, who is too haughty and self-interested to help, and then with Plebeo, whose simplicity and rustic nature⁵⁶ is an impediment to her search. Paralleling the Biblical story of the good Samaritan, her third encounter garners the most success. Pastor, the Christological figure, not only recognizes Clemencia and anticipates her concerns about Hombre, but also knows the exact location of the elusive rose bush. Her encounters with these three figures clearly indicate that mankind is not to be trusted, regardless of socio-economic status. The figures of Príncipe and Plebeo represent the entire gamut of all mortal men, and through them Sor Maria makes it clear that the spectators should trust only in the divine, embodied in the character of Pastor.

As Pastor and Clemencia exit the stage to look for the legendary flowers, Hombre appears in a boat and by way of an elaborate metaphor laments that he is lost at sea, a victim of his own misdeeds. Moved by his cries, Clemencia makes herself known to him, declaring, “Te busco como perdido” (27). As in *Clavel, y Rosa*, the gaze originates with the female protagonist and the main male character is the object of it. Pastor throws Hombre a rope made of the divine roses, and with Clemencia’s help, pulls the distraught man to shore. Although the gaze originates with Clemencia, Hombre later parrots her claim when he laments that she has left him to his own devices. He complains, “Clemencia bella, / Me dexas en tal desmayo? / Tu te ausentas como rayo, / Yo te busco como estrella” (29). The difference, of course, is that although Hombre wishes to look at Clemencia as she has looked at him, her absence makes this impossible. What is more, he is characterized as a lowly “perdido,” while she is a lofty “estrella.” Despite her essential

⁵⁶ This character provides Sor Maria with yet another opportunity to inject humor into the play. When asked if he knows the whereabouts of the elusive plant Clemencia searches for, he responds, “Si fuera planta de frutos, / Hiziera por encontrarla; / Mas de flores! Soy abeja?” (18).

role in Hombre's rescue, the protagonist allows Pastor to take the credit, although even he recognizes that such a rescue would have been impossible without her, since, "sale sin contrario / Por la virtud del Rosario / Del mar de culpas del Hombre!" (30). It is important to recognize that each time the characters in the play make reference to the Rosario or the magical roses, they invoke the image of the Virgin Mary.

Once again, the playwright restores the medieval version of Mary as an active figure through metonymic representations of the flowers and the Rosario. As Pastor explains, "Estas que ves transmutadas / En fôrma de flor, ò estrella, / Son de tu Clemencia bella / Las finezas olvidadas" (31). The king later expounds on the relationship between the Virgin Mary and the protagonist, pointing out that although Clemencia represents only one of Maria's many attributes, she is meant to stand in for her in the play. Once Hombre squares off against Luzbelo in the king's court, the roses, and, by association, Mary, continue to take on an active role. They become the arrows that defeat Luzbelo as well as the chains that bind the Furies in their caves. When a frustrated Luzbelo asks the earth to avenge him, it cannot, since, "yà la tierra está llena / Toda de Rosas de gracia, / Con que la culpa destierra" (45). The sea also offers no help, as "en virtud de aquellas flores, / Son de Rosas sus mareas" (46). Neither air nor tempest will aid him because the smell of the divine Roses permeates everything, and the even the lightning has been replaced by stars, another metonymic reference to the Virgin seen earlier in the play. The whole cast chimes in to emphasize her power:

Hombre: Con que nó pueden valerte
Ayre, Cielo, mar, y tierra,
Ní los abysmos?
Luzbelo: Porque?
Sombra: Porque están las furias prezas.
Principe: Porque estan los mares gracias.

Pastor: Porque está Rosas la tierra.
Plebeo: Porque el ayre está fragancias.
Angelo: Porque el cielo está clemencias. (47-48)

Mary controls not only the earth, but also all of the elements that exist in, on, and above it.

In fact, her power is felt in the heavenly realm, as well, where it has the power to undermine the male gaze. Upon defeating his otherworldly opponent, Hombre must present himself before the king to be judged for his actions. Here, in the divine court, all are subject to the gaze of “los ojos, que nos miran / De esas azules vidrieras” (42). This divine gaze is underscored when Angelo notes, “El Rey te mira yà,” to which Hombre responds, “”Fieros enojos! / Ò como asustan del Juez los ojos! / De su severidad estoy temblando” (51). Although this gaze seems to reinforce the traditional “equation of right spectatorship with a controlling patriarchal perspective” (Freedman 2), it is destabilized in important ways. For one, man is not only subject to the looking of a wrathful god, but also the gaze of his daughter, Severa, who is charged by her father with judging both the good and the bad. Clemencia’s influence, however, mitigates both gazes. As she says, “De mi piedad le anime un mirar / blando” (51). In the highest court, the concept of the gaze is upended and almost unrecognizable.

This is similar to what Freedman calls a “fractured reciprocity whereby beholder and beheld reverse positions in a way that renders a steady position of spectatorship impossible” (1). In this case, it originates with both male and female characters, and can manifest itself as both judgmental and forgiving. The one function it does not appear to embody is that of objectification. Here, it is always fair because Mary mitigates it. Neither Clemencia’s sister nor her father can resist her compassionate intercession on

behalf of Hombre. As a result, Rey declares, “Pregona, / Hija, por toda la esfera / De este mapa de Esmeralda, / Yà de Rosas Primavera, / A la sentencia del Hombre, / Porque todo el orbe sepa, / Lo que conmigo han podido / Las flores de tus finezas” (56). This praise and privileging of Mary surely resonated with the audience of nun spectators. As Ellington points out, “Women . . . have a special attachment to the virgin because of their sex. They also have an advantage over others when they approach her” (168). Like the mother of Christ, these female religious also identified themselves as both mother and daughter in a spiritual sense.

A few references embedded in the play make reference to female religious life, such as the amorous relationship that develops between Clemencia and Hombre towards the end of the play. Hombre asserts, “Aun que el abysmo me cerque, / Nò he dexar de quererla.” Clemencia, in turn, insists, “Nò me arrepiento de amarle, / Aun que màs ingrata sea / A mis ojos Cavallero” (50). A clear parallel exists between the love expressed between Mary and mankind, and the mystic relationship between Christ and the nuns. In both cases, a bond is formed between unequal partners, one divine and one human, and neither will cease to love, despite hardships or sin. What is more, Sor Maria inserts a reference to convent life in the final scene. When Principe points out that there are “Cavalleros” that enter into the “Divina milicia” because of the power of the fabled roses, Plebeo adds, “Y tambien ay Cavalleras, / Que los hilos del Rosario / Son las armas de las bellas” (58). This clear allusion to nuns puts them on par with the male religious who also devoted their lives to monastic ideals, as does the amorous union between Hombre and Clemencia. Sor Maria and her sisters submitted themselves to Christ as his

brides, but mankind must submit itself to the Virgin Mary as her unworthy devotee. Thus, religious devotion is not a gendered endeavor, but rather a universal one.

Although Mary is subject to a higher authority, particularly when the divinity figure appears in the role of Christ, as in *Rosal de Maria*, she exercises clear authority over him, despite his position as protagonist. In this *auto*, Sor Maria utilizes a complicated collection of mythological and pastoral figures to represent the basic story of the redemption of mankind in a different way. The shepherdesses Gracia and Almaná, who is also known as Venus, stand in for Maria and the soul, respectively, while the mythological Adonis and Mars represent Christ and the devil. Broken up into three *estaciones*, each section represents a different color of rose. The joyful mysteries correspond to white roses, the sorrowful mysteries to red roses, and the glorious mysteries to yellow or golden roses, as we see in *Rosal de Maria*. The *auto* as a whole functions as a type of dramatic triptych of the life of Christ. The first (*Rosas blancas*) deals with the condescension of Christ, the second (*Rosas coloradas*) with his sacrifice, and the third (*Rosas dorados*) with his resurrection and the subsequent redemption of mankind.

As the play begins, the audience finds the stage is strewn with white roses as three shepherds enter singing and marvel at the beautiful sight. In an eight-page-long monologue, Gracia gives an explanation of her identity and recounts the story of a love triangle featuring Adonis, Almaná,⁵⁷ and Marte. She explains that the unseen Gran Mayoral, representing God the father, banished the rebellious Marte from Olympus, or Heaven, and that Almaná's transgressions keep her from entering this sacred realm, as

⁵⁷ The name Almaná is clearly based on the Spanish word for soul, Alma. As in Sor Marcela's spiritual colloquies, this character stands in, first and foremost, for each member of the convent audience, and, by extension, all of mankind.

well. Thus, Adonis will descend from his exalted throne to save his beloved with the help of Gracia, his mother. Despite Marte's best efforts, the jilted lover does indeed convince his bride to return to him, which causes Marte to declare war against his enemy. Adonis appears again at the beginning of the second *estación*, and although he does not relish the sacrifice he must make, he willingly gives his life in order to save Almana. Marte convinces the unseen *villanos* to kill his rival, and the spilling of Adonis's blood turns the white roses red. Almana and the other shepherdesses lament his death, as do Gracia and the shepherds. In the third and final section, Almana joyfully discovers that her lover has resurrected, thus turning the red flowers into golden ones. In order to help her understand the significance of the roses, Adonis shows her the future, or rather, the nuns' present, so that she understands that only the red roses, reminiscent of his sacrifice, can save souls from a wicked world. The play ends with all of the characters singing Mary's praises.

Intriguingly, this play does not feature a Marian figure in a particularly conspicuous role, unlike both *Clavel, y Rosa* and *La flor de las finezas*. Rather, the Christ character and Almana function as the protagonists. This shift is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the nun spectators would have understood that Almana stood in for them in the spiritual allegory. Seeing themselves represented in such a prominent fashion shifted the focus of the dramatic action to their participation in the divine plan of redemption, as well as the integral nature of their role in it. Second, although Gracia's time on stage is limited, her presence is felt in other ways, and, tellingly, the final lines of the play make no mention of Jesus, but rather emphasize the necessity of Mary in the salvation of mankind. Not only do the lines reference the mother of Christ, but the characters also repeat them in a choral fashion so that each expression of praise is heard twice, thereby

underscoring their importance to the spectators. What is more, Gracia's introductory monologue places her squarely in a position of power, as she declares, "Soy aquella muger fuerte, / Aquella Pastora Regia, / Que en el Olympo Divino / Quebró al dragon la cabeza" (62).⁵⁸ She is the strong female figure whose might is so great that she overcame Satan himself.⁵⁹ Once more, Sor Maria recaptures the essence of a medieval 'active' Mary. In Gracia's speech the playwright emphasizes this character's central role in the divine plan, as when she explains that Christ "En mi cabaña se alverga, / De mis tosquillos se viste, / De mi leche se alimenta, / De mi butiro, y mi miel" or when she declares that she will declare the good tidings throughout the world, promising, "yo por todo el Paiz, / Voy a dar la alegre nueva" (71). This is not the enclosed, contemplative Mary promoted by early modern thinkers.

Sor Maria also underscores Mary's role as mother. Gracia explains to Adonis, "Tu Padre te fió / A mi cuidado," and Sylvano points out, "Como al Niño perdido / Su Madre le buscó" (82). This reveals something of an infantilization of the Christ figure. Although his mother is not present for the majority of the play, her presence is felt throughout, and each mention of the words "rosa," "rosal," or "clemencia" alludes to her responsibility both to her divine son and to all of humankind. The role of mother, in certain ways, trumps that of the Son of God. In fact, without her, he would be unable to perform his duties. Domingo points out that she offers her beloved son "el abrigo, el sust[en]to, y el consuelo" (112). Domingo goes on to explain that without Gracia as intercessor, Almana could not be forgiven of her transgressions. Thus, both the human and the divine have

⁵⁸ The same reference to Mary killing the serpent also appears in *La flor de las finezas*.

⁵⁹ Here Sor Maria capitalizes on the Ave/Eva dichotomy that identifies Eve as the fallen woman who gave in to temptation in the Garden of Eden and Mary as the redemptive figure who crushed the serpent through her righteousness.

need of Mary. In fact, when Almaná finally resolves to accept Adonis as “Esposo, y Señor” (121), the final chorus of praise does not center on the Christ figure, but rather on the “Rosas Divinas” and “flores supremas” that belong to Mary as “Rosario, Corona, y estrellas” (122).

As in Sor María’s other plays, the environs in which this work was written and performed allowed the playwright to play with the concept of the gaze. Marte, representative of the devil, declares that Gracia is “de tan alta esfera” that “Tócava estrellas, y pizava Luna.” Because of her elevated state and her otherworldly beauty, he gripes, “nò sé que tiene su belleza, / Que temo de mirarla, solo al verla, / Sin saber la razon, por que temerla” (73). Her beauty does not incite him to look, but rather prevents the look from taking place. In this way, she counters the concept of “woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man” (25). Later, the shepherdesses look at and comment on the physical beauty of the shepherd Adonis. Almaná exclaims, “Que tan bello el Joven!” and Marina agrees, stating, “Es tan hermoso, que el Sol / Comparado a su arrebol, / Queda triste en su zenit.” Amira also chimes in, declaring that “entre los hijos de los hombres / El màs especioso fué” (75). The object of three simultaneous female gazes, the Christological figure is subjected to their judgment of his beauty and objectified in a way that alludes to the sexual nature of mystical union with Christ, as well as the vows taken by nuns wed to divinity. Almaná also employs Petrarchan synecdoche when looking for her beloved, whose corpse lies onstage, unseen by her. When asking if anyone has seen him,⁶⁰ she describes him by saying, “Sus señas son,

⁶⁰ This question, directed towards the audience, underscores the fact that in early modern theater, no so-called ‘fourth wall’ existed between the audience and the actors. This was especially true in a space such as a convent recreation room, where the lack of an elevated stage and backstage areas allows for an inclusive theatre experience in which the audience participates in the staging.

escuchadme, / Vivir en su faz alegre / De la Assucena lo blanco, / Y de Rosa lo ardiente; / Sus ojos la luz componen, / Sus labios la mirrha vierten, / Su pelo a la Nazarena / Rayos solta, y almas prende” (92). Although she emphasizes his intangible qualities, she does so by way of his physical features. Once she realizes that Adonis has died, she laments his fate by asking, “Que mano fatal alebe / Quebró la luz a tus ojos, / Adonde el amor la enciende? / Quien de tus mexillas bellas, / Quien de tus labios fieles, / Lo que ha sido Abril florido / Hizo palido Diziembre?” (94). This piecemeal portrayal of the protagonist does not, however, cater to the sexual desires of Almaná. Rather than the sexual stimulation that the male gaze provides, here the visual stimulation is spiritual. What she notes in his features are light, love, fidelity, and salvation. She looks not to fulfill a carnal desire, but a divine one.

Not only do female characters such as Almaná usurp the gaze, but they exercise power, as well. In *Perla, y Rosa*, the third *auto* of the collection, the Marian figure has unmistakable power over other male characters, such as the wily Universo, Engaño, and Chiste. This play, Sor María’s version of the parable of the good shepherd,⁶¹ features two female characters, Preciosa and Perla. Both are members of Buen Pastor’s flock, but clearly represent Mary and the soul, respectively. As the play opens, Universo, portrayed as a monarch, instructs his hunters to bring him a lost soul who has wandered from her home and entered his country thanks to the wiles of Engaño. Chiste, the *gracioso* character, adds a humorous element to the play with his witticisms and jibes, as when he wishes aloud that Universo were hunting a wild beast, as it would be preferable to

⁶¹ This parable, recorded in both Matthew and Luke, compares Jesus to a shepherd and mankind to sheep and asks, “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Luke 15:4).

searching for a woman. Perla, the lost soul, indicates that her original intention was simply to explore the wonders of the world for a time and return, but the pleasures of Universo's kingdom and his flattery have kept her from returning to her rightful home. Pastor, distraught at the loss of one of his own, desperately looks for his beloved with the help of Preciosa, the Marian figure. When Pastor finds Perla in Universo's court, he asks her to choose between them, and much to his dismay, the wayward *dama* elects to stay with the worldly monarch. Pastor explains that he cannot force Perla to come with him since she possesses agency, and so Preciosa invents a plan to persuade the lost soul to return to the fold. She lures Perla from Universo's worldly rose garden to her own divine *rosal* by way of music so beautiful and moving that it is practically irresistible. Universo commands a terrible storm to take his revenge upon Perla for leaving him, but Preciosa saves her. Eventually, Preciosa also saves Universo from Engaño, along with two *damas* from his court. The play ends with music that praises Mary and references the "Hail Mary" prayer said with the Rosary.

Mary's participation is central to the dramatic action, and her interaction with Pastor illuminates yet another facet of the Virgin's nature. Contrary to the assertions of early modern philosophers, who portrayed man as the seat of reason, Preciosa's dialogue with Pastor reveals her as logical and rational while portraying the Christ figure as emotional and almost hysterical. When Pastor insists on looking for Perla, Preciosa asks, "Señor, si noventa y nueve / Te quedan?" (138). When he laments that he cannot compare with the ostentatious Universo and exclaims "fiera congoxa!," she calms him with "Señor sossiega," and when he wonders how he will go forward with his plan to bring Perla home, she reminds him that "para livre alvedrio / Nò avrá segura custodia"

(139). Although she warns him that by seeking the lost soul he puts himself in danger, he insists on following through and she agrees to help him by offering her “piedosa intercession” (142), despite the risks. He is headstrong and driven by emotions, whereas she recognizes the perils and weighs the possible outcomes before making a decision. Thus the playwright upends characteristics thought to be gender-specific. Not only does Preciosa serve as the voice of reason, but her actions make salvation possible. Despite Pastor’s best attempts to win over his beloved lost soul, he fails to bring her home. Preciosa’s plan of luring the wayward Perla to the heavenly *rosal* with music, on the other hand, succeeds. In what can be perceived as a shift away from mainstream Catholic theology, the Marian figure must make up for the failings of the Christ figure. Just as “Women take place, and refigure that taking place, in ways that challenge traditional forms or representation” (Freedman 151) in secular plays of the period, here the playwright openly challenges the early modern version of Mary by opting to portray her as did medieval religious thinkers.

Sor Maria once again makes very clear allusions to convent life, and her characterization of Perla allows her not only to represent the nuns participating in the spectacle, but also to reference convent life within the play. She does this by juxtaposing the world and its temptations with the refuge of the convent in *Perla, y Rosa*. For example, in his attempts to convince Perla to stay in his court, Universo asks her, “Que importa que seas oro, / Que importa que Perla seas, / Si tosca mina te occulta, / Y bruta concha te encierra?” (131). In a distorted version of the candle metaphor found in the

fifth chapter of Matthew,⁶² the worldly monarch plays to Perla's vanity and argues that she should not be hidden, not in order to glorify God, but rather to glorify herself. Just as a mine hides gold and a shell encases a pearl, the nuns, too, may have discovered their own existence reflected in this sentiment. The enclosure of the convent not only kept them safe, but also kept the outside world from perceiving their beauty, charity, intelligence, and talents. This reflects Soja's argument that "spatial practices, . . . representations of space, and . . . spaces of representation . . . are always being profoundly shaped by the workings of power" (87). The struggle Perla experiences would also have been familiar to Sor Maria and her sisters.

Although the protagonist recognizes the virtues of the loving Pastor, she cannot help but be tempted by the pleasures of secular life. For instance, the two *damas* that inhabit Universo's court tantalize the lost soul with promises of "La purpura . . . faldelin," "dorados trensas," "Uno, y otro festin," "la flauta pastoral," "chocolate," "La salchiça, el conejo, y la perdiz" (155). The inclusion of clothing, secular music, and food is revealing. Despite the fact that written texts of plays are "a mark *in place of* acts, a relic in place of performances: it is only their remainder, the sign of their erasure" (Certeau 35), we can infer how this performance must have affected its spectators. The nuns, upon taking their vows and entering the convent, had to sacrifice fancy clothing, delicious morsels, and entertaining music, and the mention of these luxuries surely would have

⁶² In the bible, this metaphor is found in Matthew 5:14-16, which says, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

stirred a longing for pleasures forgone. Nevertheless, the playwright reminds her audience that such indulgences pale in comparison with the eternal splendors that await them in the afterlife if they follow Perla's lead and return to the fold, or, better yet, imitate Preciosa, and never leave it. In other words, the author challenges them to disprove Chiste's assertion, "Quando nõ dexò la dama / a la Cruz, di, por la gala?" (148-49). The Marian figures Sor Maria presents in her convent drama provide the perfect example by privileging righteous deeds over introverted contemplation.

The characterization of Marian figures in atypical ways continues in the fourth *auto* of the series, *Las rosas con las espigas*. Arguably the most problematic of the set, this play features Flor, who is charged with buying an appropriate dress⁶³ for a banquet celebrating her upcoming nuptials to Rey. In what may be an allusion to the parable of the ten virgins,⁶⁴ the king has warned her that she cannot attend without proper attire. On her way to do so, Mundo, Engaño, Locura, and Amor accost her and cheat her out of her money. Amor gains further control over her by making her fall in love with him, thereby imprisoning her. Gomindo⁶⁵ (Sabbath) and Deya (prayer) set out to rescue her with one hundred and fifty roses,⁶⁶ representing the beads of the rosary.⁶⁷ When they bring her

⁶³ Rey's insistence that Flor be dressed properly for the banquet is reminiscent of the apostle Paul's epistles to both the Ephesians and the Colossians, in which he urges them to "put off the old man" and "put on the new man" (Colossians 3:9-10).

⁶⁴ This parable, found in Matthew 25:1-13, tells the story of ten virgins, five who are wise, and five who are foolish. As they await the arrival of the bridegroom, Christ, they all bring their lamps with them, since they do not know when he will arrive. While the wise virgins bring extra oil for the lamps, the foolish virgins are poorly prepared and their oil is spent by the time the impending arrival of the awaited guest is announced. The foolish virgins ask their wise counterparts to share their oil, which they refuse to do, lest they also run out of oil. In desperation, those lacking this precious resource hurry out to buy more, only to find that by the time they return, the doors are shut and they cannot enter to participate in the marriage ceremony. The moral of the story is found in verse thirteen, which states, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."

⁶⁵ This name is an anagram of the word *domingo*.

⁶⁶ This number reflected the number of Psalms in the Bible.

back to the king, he discovers she is unprepared to meet him and vacillates between enacting justice and bestowing mercy on his wayward charge. Mundo, Locura, and Amor reappear in an effort to enslave her once and for all, but Gomindo counters their efforts with roses yet again and restores her to the king's good graces. Mundo returns crowned with roses, representing the intercession of Mary, and the king forgives his trespasses, as well. In turn, Amor returns crowned with thorns, representative of the sacrifice of Christ, appearing this time in the form of "amor verdadero" (225) rather than representing carnal love. All is amended as Rey and Flor declare their mutual love.

As far as countering the male gaze is concerned, this play is the least successful of the six works studied here. In fact, the language the king uses with the female protagonist is extremely aggressive and abusive. For example, when telling her she must dress appropriately for the wedding banquet, he threatens her by saying,

Pero si ingrata, ò grocera,
Gastas el caudal precioso
En mugeriles enprezas,
Y en mi banquete apareces
Sin la devida decencia,
Nó te fies, nó te fies,
Porque aun que tu amor me quema,
Para que pagues las culpas,
Tengo de tragar las penas . . .
Todo convertido en rayos
Para bolverte en pabeza
Será. (187-88)

This mistreatment continues throughout the play, although towards the end, Rey vacillates between enacting punishment and forgiving Flor, who often finds herself the object of the male gaze. The king is the worst offender, frequently commenting on her beauty and using his sight to pass judgment on her. In fact, after Flor's misadventure with

⁶⁷ Modern rosaries contain fifty beads, divided into ten groups.

Mundo, Amor, Locura, and Engaño, she expresses her desire to flee the king's gaze, and when she realizes he is looking at her in her fallen state, she laments, "Ay de mi, que el Rey me mira" (135). She is well aware of the danger posed by this male gaze. As Mulvey states, "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox" (19). Amor participates in this objectification, as well, to which Flor candidly responds, "Vuestra ozadia me admira" (192). It seems she is never free from being the object of their visual desire.

Freedman argues that "Not only pleasure but plot is derived from male fantasies that depend on the scopic and narrative exploitation of woman" (118). Nevertheless, although the male gaze has the power to exploit and objectify, the gaze of the female characters has the power to inflict the pain of love, as do Cupid's arrows. Amor complains that Flor's eyes "herir racionales saben" (196), and Gomindo explains that the king is "aneamorado de su vista hermosa" (204). Additionally, since the king represents deity in this work, all the characters can be objects of his gaze, although this occurs in a very subtle way. Speaking of the banquet, Rey announces, "Yà a la meza soberana, / Los que de su honor excelso / Participan, se sentaron, / Yo que de enboso los veo / A mirar se llegan màs" (221). He passes judgment not only on Flor, but on all those who sit at his table, as all are subject to his gaze. It is also intriguing to note that in one scene, Rey utilizes a sort of self-referential Petrarchanism as he divides his person into a hand, an arm, a heart, eyes, a chest, and hair when talking of his devotion to Flor. Each part of his body is dedicated to her service. Typically a tactic utilized by men to objectify women piecemeal, Sor Maria usurps and appropriates this trope for her own purposes.

This *auto* is also problematic because of the absence of a central Marian figure. Although Flor references her in name, and Deya represents calling on her in prayer, a character directly symbolizing the Virgin Mary is conspicuously absent from this text. Nevertheless, her presence is felt via the many references to sacred roses, which occur throughout the play. For example, Deya speaks of a garden in which “Tantas gracias, y primores / Dan sus perfecciones bellas, / Que el Cielo le ofrece estrellas, / Para que las pague en flores” (206).⁶⁸ The roses that grow here are special, “siendo cada Rosa un Dios” (207). These are the roses that Deya and Gomindo must gather in order to help the ill-treated Flor return to her proper place. Only these flowers, imbued with heavenly power, can save those who find themselves in Flor’s position. When the protagonist finally presents herself before the king, Mundo covers her with “las purpuras del mundo” (214), and they turn to smoke. Locura then gives her a golden dress, which dissolves into dirt in a type of *memento mori*, reminding characters and audience members alike of the fugacity of worldly riches. Afterwards, Amor attempts to dress her in flames, “Que el incendio de un amante, / Es la gala de una Dama” (216). Flor, of course rejects this offer, and laments that she yet lacks the proper adornment for the banquet. Finally, Gomindo appears with a thread of roses and explains, “Aqui tienes una gala, / Que las Rosas deste hilo / Son la vestidura rara, / Y si con ellas te adornas, / . . . / Entrarás en el banquete” (218). Only the garment made of roses will placate the king’s ire and allow Flor to return to his presence. Gomindo also counters Amor’s arrows with flowers when they fight over Flor, since “el Divino Rosario / es ruina fatal del adversario” (220). As in Sor Maria’s other *autos*, roses in their various manifestations, as clothing, thread, and weapons, represent Mary and her power over sin, as well as her irresistible influence over male

⁶⁸ The playwright often employs the words *estrella* and *rosa* as synonyms.

divinity figures. As the play concludes, Sor Maria anticipates her next dramatic work as all the characters praise both the roses (Mary), and the wheat (Christ), which are inseparable and participate in a symbiotic relationship with redemptive powers.

In contrast to *Las Rosas con las Espigas*, the fifth and final *auto* of the collection, titled *Trez redenciones del hombre*, features an incredibly strong Marian figure, as well as other commanding female characters. In fact, it boasts the largest number of characters of the whole collection, and centers on Gracia's efforts to save Hombre from her competitor, Culpa. Set up as a love triangle between the three of them, the playwright presents the two female characters as bitter rivals, one that seeks to edify and one that intends to destroy the object of her affection. As the title suggests, the play is divided into three sections, labeled as 'redemptions,' in which Culpa, along with her henchmen, Engaño, Olvido, Delicia, and Lizonja, forces Hombre into differing perils. Gracia facilitates these redemptions with the help of her entourage, consisting of Plazer, Oliva, Tierra, and Rosa. In the first redemption, Culpa plays the part of siren, enticing Hombre to drown himself in a sea of sin. Calling on the story of the wanderings of Odysseus,⁶⁹ Sor Maria transforms the classic epic tale into a Christian fable.⁷⁰ Accompanied by Plazer, Gracia saves Hombre with the help of Oliva, "El fruto de las piedades" (251). Although the wayward Hombre promises never to stray again upon his rescue from certain death, his assurances soon prove to be vain.

In the second redemption, Gracia recounts the first salvation of man and explains that he has found himself in peril yet again. Hurt by Culpa, he now convalesces in a hospital of her making, representative of the world, in which she poses as his nurse and

⁶⁹ Sor Maria uses the Latin version of the name, referring to the hero as "Ulizes" (244) in her play.

⁷⁰ This occurs during Culpa's eight-page-long monologue in the first section of the play.

fails to cure him of his ills, despite her insistence that she is indeed trying to nurse him back to health. In this hospital, Hombre is literally dying of hunger. Gracia, then, must convince him of Culpa's true intentions by means of an extended metaphor. The plates of food offered to him by his nurse are nothing but large helpings of human frailty that turn to dirt and worsen his condition. Gracia, on the other hand, offers "el pan precioso, y santo" (265) that will save him from starvation.⁷¹ Tierra then appears with a handful of *espigas*, or wheat stalks, explaining that the bread Gracia has referenced "Es el pan de tierra virgin, / Que en Bellen su fruto ha dado" (266), thus referencing the virgin birth of Christ. Hombre chooses Gracia's bread over Culpa's plates of bitter earth, and escapes death.

The third and final redemption utilizes Greek mythology as Christian metaphor as Sor Maria weaves the story of the Minotaur into the action of the play. In this redemption, Hombre stands in for Theseus, while Culpa plays the part of the Minotaur and Gracia acts as Ariadne, providing the hero with a thread made from one hundred and fifty roses⁷² in order to help him find his way out of the labyrinth, which represents the world. Although Plazer is not convinced that Hombre will make it out alive, Gracia insists on trusting her beloved, who does not immediately see Culpa for what she is, as she deceives him with her "falsa belleza" (280). Just when it seems that Hombre will succumb yet again to Culpa's wiles, she asks him to let go of the roses he clutches in his

⁷¹ By referencing the sacrament in this way, the playwright alludes to Bible verses that juxtapose the consumption of food with partaking of what Christ has to offer, which is everlasting. For example, in the story of Jesus and the woman at the well, he tells her, "Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13-14). Later, Christ also references the manna sent to the Israelites in the desert, and explains, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger" (John 6:35).

⁷² This number, of course, references the number of beads on the Rosary.

hand. When he refuses, she threatens his life, thus revealing her true nature as Hombre sees her transformed by anger into the monster she truly is. She cannot prevail against the roses, however, and Hombre defeats her and makes his way back to Gracia, and the two lovers reunite.

Intriguingly, not only is Hombre the inert object of affection of both Gracia and Culpa, but he also possesses an overwhelming number of traditionally feminine traits. He is easily seduced by Culpa's siren song, inconstant in love, untrustworthy, given to indulging his appetite, passive, and indecisive. For example, when asked to choose between his two potential lovers in the second redemption, he complains, "Encanto, y belleza pura / Me llama en lances precisos, / La Culpa con sus echizos, / La Gracia con su hermosura: / Nò sé, que escogan mis penas, / Ni adonde inclinen forçosas" (263). What is more, he refuses to listen to Gracia and Rosa, the voices of reason, and his shortcomings threaten to be his downfall. Upon his first rescue, he promises Gracia he will no longer stray, to which Plazer cynically responds, "Ay que es palabra, y es hombre, / Uno tierra, y otro viento" (160). Engaño chimes in during the third redemption, calling him, "El hombre vacilante" (269), and Plazer insults him once again with the epithet "bellaco." Even Gracia has to admit that he got what was coming to him, since "Lo merezca su inconstancia" (276). In short, he is everything we would expect an early modern female character to be.

Although it is true that Hombre represents all humankind in this allegory, the fact that the playwright decides to employ a male protagonist rather than a female one is telling. Whereas characters such as Perla and Flor also find themselves alienated from God and in need of Mary's intervention, Sor Maria portrays them in a kinder light than

Hombre. While her female protagonists do indeed go astray, their transgressions result from abuse or trickery, whereas Hombre's wrongdoings seem to be the direct result of inherent character flaws. This reminds us of Freedman's argument that dramatic reframing "emphasizes the arbitrariness of class assignments, acknowledges and enforces alternative class memberships, and so changes one's perspective on a problematic situation" (145). In this case, the same is true for gender norms. The playwright is able to reframe a male character as object, thereby acknowledging and enforcing alternative possibilities as far as gendered characteristics are concerned. Certeau asserts that tactics such as these are "victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong' (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things" (xix). Only in the convent space could Sor Maria 'get away with' challenging traditional assertions that negative characteristics such as inconstancy and frailty of character are inherently feminine.

Not only is her male protagonist portrayed as weak-willed, but also her main female characters, Gracia and Culpa, are astoundingly strong. In fact, these two characters deliver majority of the lines in the play between them, each with lengthy monologues filling up to eight pages. As they fight for the redemption and destruction of man, respectively, they conjure up storms, alter their appearance, call up sea monsters and nymphs, and deftly employ rhetoric, all in an effort to defeat each other. What is more, they are not the only female characters that exercise a considerable amount of power within the logic of the play. In fact, Oliva calms the sea to help save Hombre, Tierra causes an earthquake upon the offstage death of Christ in order to shake Culpa to her core, and Rosa provides Hombre with the flowery weapons he needs to defeat the

Minotaur. The secondary male characters, Engaño, Olvido, and Plazer, appear in more of an advisory role, offering ideas and providing support rather than acting.

Not only is Hombre secondary in importance to his female counterparts, but his male gaze is problematic, as well. As Freedman points out, “If theater reveals that objects exist only insofar as they are displaced by a look, it also offers various reactive and interactive means of displacing and renewing the act of seeing” (141). Here the act of seeing is particularly displaced and renewed when Hombre looks at Culpa. When he does so, he sees what he wants to see rather than recognizing her for what she is, supporting Freedman’s theory that identification often leads to misidentification. In the first redemption, she appears to him as a beautiful mermaid, which keeps him from perceiving of her as a dangerous siren. In the worldly hospital, he beholds a kind caretaker, which means he cannot appreciate the fact that she is not nursing him back to health, but, rather, slowly killing him. In the dangerous labyrinth, he sees only a beautiful woman, not the murderous monster Rosa warned him of. Culpa uses Hombre’s faulty sight to her advantage. He looks, but the image his gaze conjures is clearly not the right one, and it threatens to destroy him. Unfortunately, the same holds true for his perception of Gracia. If he saw her from the beginning as the redeemer she truly is, he would never have ceded to Culpa’s temptations. His misunderstanding of, or perhaps lack of appreciation for, her role almost destroys him more than once.

Sor Maria emphasizes this redemptive role over and over throughout the play, utilizing various characters as her mouthpiece. Gracia, for one, explains, “De mano de su Madre peregrine, / Mystica de mayor esfera, / La redencion recibe” (278). Plazer calls her “Dioza” (251), Hombre underscores her divine nature, and even Culpa recognizes her

rival as a “Princeza tan soberana” (239) who has the power to lift up Hombre with her. When Culpa complains in the third redemption that Hombre has chosen the “otra dama” over her, he corrects her by saying, “Nò es verdad, / Que . . . [es] deidad, / Y tu la tratas de dama” (283). Although the playwright does make mention of Christ in the second redemption, no Christological figure ever appears onstage or takes an active role in saving Hombre. Rather, Gracia, the Marian figure, is fully credited with his salvation. There is no sign of the early modern contemplative Mary here, but rather the dynamic medieval figure who actively redeems. This shift is significant because, as Ellington points out, “As a woman, Mary was . . . useful to preachers as a means to illustrate behavior that they felt to be appropriate specifically for women, in the secular or religious sphere” (143). Just as male preachers utilized the figure of the Virgin Mary outside of the convent to encourage women to lead a contemplative, enclosed existence, Sor Maria emphasizes an active version of the mother of Christ to provide them with a different kind of example to follow. The protected and protective space of the convent allowed the playwright and her sisters to look to a different kind of model than the one proposed by male ecclesiastical leaders. This exemplar imbued them with power and authority.

Although it may be true, as Certeau insists, that “places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state” (108), Sor Maria’s plays allow us a unique insight into the enigmatic stories of convent life. We can, in fact, read the past through them when we consider where and how they were produced. Sor Maria and her sisters chose resistance to prescriptive patriarchal norms intended to relegate women to passive roles in both society and the church. As Soja

points out, “choosing marginality becomes a critical turning-point in the construction of other forms of counter-hegemonic or subaltern identity and more embracing communities of resistance” (97). In this case, counter-hegemonic identity is embodied by the active Marian figures who counter the male gaze in *Clavel, y Rosa*, as well as in each *auto* in the *Triunfo do Rosario* collection. In them, Sor Maria revitalized a medieval version of the Virgin Mary that women could follow to as they formed their own, personal relationships with deity. They could identify with her on different levels as mother, bride, and woman, and the convent space provided the perfect place for this revival of an active, redemptive, and indispensable Mary.

CHAPTER IV

Playing the Part: Sor Violante do Ceo's *Villancicos*

“Theatre undermines the comfortable opposition between reality and illusion . . .”
Gay McAuley

This chapter centers on the works of another Portuguese nun, Sor Violante do Ceo (1601?-1693). Although we know very few details of her life, according to most biographers, including Diogo Barbosa Machado, she was born in Portugal in 1601 (775). She entered the convent of Nossa Senhora da Rosa da Ordem do Grande Patriarca Santo Domingos in 1630 at the age of twenty-nine, and lived and worked there until her death at the age of ninety-two in 1693. Although Sor Violante penned two full-length *comedias*, *El hijo, esposo, y hermano* and *La vitoria por la cruz*, neither of these plays is extant, since the catastrophic fires following the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 destroyed her convent and all its contents. Many of her other literary works are still available, although some are more easily accessible than others.⁷³ *Rimas Várias*, a collection of her poetry originally printed in 1646, was reprinted in 1993, and has been the subject of both classroom discussion and critical studies. In contrast, my master's thesis, “An Edition of Sor Violante do Ceo's *Villancicos*,” is the only available modern

⁷³ We know that Sor Violante also wrote *Romance a Christo Crucificado* (1659), *Soliloquio ao S.S. Sacramento* (1662), *Soliloquios para antes, e depois da Comunhão* (1668), and *Meditações da Missa* (1689) (Barbosa Machado 775). To my knowledge, none of these works is extant.

version of a portion of *Parnaso Lusitano*, a collection of poetry and *villancicos*, which has not received much attention since its posthumous publication in 1733. *Parnaso Lusitano* is a two-volume work, the first of which contains sixty-four *villancicos* and is followed by the second volume, which contains more than one hundred *villancicos*. Unfortunately, the scope of my thesis did not allow me to include all of the works from the original text, and one hundred sonnets, thirteen *canciones*, nine *silvas*, four elegies, four epistles, three *octavas*, thirty-five *depreçaçams*, eight *romances*, twenty-two *redondillas*, and one *decima* have yet to be published in a modern edition. These poems have not been studied due to the difficulty of accessing them.

Sor Violante's *Parnaso Lusitano* contains two hundred fifty-two *villancicos* in total, but due to limitations of the scope of this project, I have selected only a few in order to illustrate the theatricality of the *villancicos* as a whole. Their dialogic form, characterization, references to music, dance, and costuming, and their self-conscious nature all indicate that they were meant for performance. The great majority of these works celebrate people or sacred objects that feature prominently in Catholic theology, such as saints, martyrs, and the crown of thorns. A few others center on the profession of new nuns.⁷⁴ Sor Violante dedicated seventy-two *villancicos* to the birth of Christ, forty-eight to the ascension of Christ, thirty-four to the Eucharist, and fifty-nine to John the Baptist.⁷⁵ Some others stand alone or are part of a much smaller set. These have titles such as *A nuestra Señora del Rosario*, *A S. Juan Evangelista*, *A S. Jacintho de Polonia*, *Al Jordan*, and *A S. Luis Beltran*.

⁷⁴ This is in keeping with other convent dramas, such as Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento's *Fiestecilla para una profesión religiosa*.

⁷⁵ Because so many of the *villancicos* share the same title, they are listed both by their name and by the order they are to be found in the set. For example, the third *villancico* in the set dedicated to John the Baptist is "A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico III."

Critics have had difficulty classifying *villancicos* as a genre and they are almost never taught as a theatrical genre since, at first glance, they appear to be poetry. However, Sor Violante wrote her *villancicos* for performance. In fact, she distinguishes between her *romances* and the *villancicos*, even though they often utilize the same eight-syllable pattern with assonant rhyme in every other line. This indicates that she wrote the former as poetry and the latter as theater. These *villancicos* were meant for performance just as other dramatic forms of the Golden Age, such as *loas*, *comedias*, *entremeses*, and *autos sacramentales*. I believe that if we view them as merely religious verse, we allow ourselves an extremely limited vision of their purpose and artistry. What is more, studying these *villancicos* as performance pieces reveals that the convent space allowed nuns to play unexpected roles. Only in this space of ‘paradoxical geography’ could these devout women take on new and forbidden identities, albeit temporarily.

Speaking of *villancicos* as theater, Merlin Forster explains that some critics see them as “lyric poetry, while others consider them as ceremonial and musical events that make use of many elements of dramatic form” (271). Adapted and adopted from a form of music sung by *villanos* or *rústicos*, today we associate the *villancico* with Christmas festivities as a kind of traditional carol. The Marqués de Santillana most likely penned the earliest example of these, which appeared during the middle of the fifteenth century, although Antonio Sánchez Romeralo suggests we cannot assume anything conclusive about their origins. He explains, “Nada sabemos positivamente sobre la antigüedad del nombre” (34). Forster argues that this genre originated from “the 10th-century mozarabic *zéjel*” (271), while Paul R. Laird claims not only the *zéjel* but also “verse-refrain types found in medieval Galician-Portuguese literature” as antecedents to the form (5), and that

although the *villancico* stemmed from courtly song, the earliest examples of the genre have devotional or religious texts (17). Sister Mary Paulina St. Amour includes, as well, the possibility of a native Castilian lyric influencing the *villancico*'s development (7). *Villancicos* were often included in both secular and religious early modern drama, as well as sung at the various "stations of the Cross" during Corpus Christi celebrations, which traditionally concluded with a *villancico* performance (Chase 70).

Evidence exists that these dramatic songs were also performed alternately between the acts of plays in cathedrals and churches during certain services (St. Amour 118), and even came to substitute "Latin responsories during matins on high feast days like Christmas, Epiphany, various Marian feasts, and saints' days" (Laird 20). The *villancico* enjoyed great popularity as part of early modern religious celebrations, since Catholic officials often allowed it to be a bit earthier and rowdier than the formal rituals conducted in Latin. Notwithstanding their integral role in sacred drama, both authors and audience members held them in less regard than other art forms, such as poetry, despite (or perhaps because of) their widespread appeal. In this sense, they might be thought of as religious *entremeses*. St. Amour hypothesizes that they were used in religious service "as part of the sacred drama," and that "when the drama was removed, the *villancico* remained" (119). Eventually their performance was limited to events associated with the celebration of Christmas.

The *villancico*'s strong ties with religious theater attest to its theatricality. Gilbert Chase considers this genre to be the predecessor of the Spanish drama while St. Amour believes it links medieval drama with *autos sacramentales*. The neoclassic playwright and theorist Leandro Fernández de Moratín insists that religious dramatic presentations

were reduced to “unos breves diálogos mezclados con canciones y danzas honestas, que desempeñaban los sacristanes, mozos de coro, cantores y acolitos” (qtd. in St. Amour 105). He does not see them as songs, but rather brief dialogues mixed with song and dance. They “became familiar to the people as an element of official worship,” similar to the *auto sacramental*, and members of the clergy used them “in connection with liturgical services” (St. Amour 118-19). Because religious services featured the performance of *villancicos*, Sor Violante was, in all probability, familiar with the genre and its staging, and this knowledge helped in the writing and staging of her own *villancicos*. Moreover, the introductory note that precedes the collection reads, “*Contem varios vilhancicos, e letras para as solemnidades, e festas dos mysterios de Christo S. N. e de nossa Senhora, e de varios Santos, para se cantarem em os seus festivos dias*” (37). In this way, Sor Violante clearly indicates that she penned her works as performance pieces.

This chapter focuses on the performance aspects of Sor Violante’s *villancicos* as related to the space in which they were performed and how their theatricality fought against the fact that “Space is organized in ways that reproduce gender differences in power and privilege” (Spain 233). In other words, I will analyze these works according to the tenets of performance criticism, which “treats the written text of a play as a script to be realized in performance” (*Encyclopedia* 133) and takes into consideration the theatrical milieu in which they were written and the possibilities for their staging. Although critics such as Johannes Fabian define theatricality broadly to include “performativeness in communication, skills of representation, invention of forms of presentation, [and] actual performances” (212), I am more interested in the term as it relates to the performance text. Thomas Postlewait and Tracy Davis identify theatricality

as an important “interpretative model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles” (1). Each of these manifestations of theater, of course had a profound impact on convent theater.

While it may hold true, as Postlewait insists, that “the idea of theatricality has achieved an extraordinary range of meanings” (1), I must necessarily limit these meanings in order to use the concept as an interpretive and analytical tool. When the term appears here, I use it in reference to what Mathew Stroud calls “performance signs imbedded in the texts themselves” (27), and what Edward Friedman refers to when he advocates identifying “the micro-signs or network of signifying systems that comprise the performance text” (57). In other words, anything that evidences the performance nature of the text, while distinguishing it from prose and poetry, contributes to its theatricality. In the case of the *villancicos*, I argue for their dramatic nature by studying evidences of staging, such as dialogue, costuming, and characterization, in order to show that they fit within the theatrical framework.

Some of the *villancicos* are more obviously theatrical than others, but each one is a short theatrical piece that was meant for to performance. The most noticeable evidence of their theatricality is the presence of clearly marked dialogue. For example, Sor Violante’s often designates the presence of multiple voices within the text by marking them with “P.” (*pregunta*) and “R.” (*respuesta*), or with the characters’ names, such as “Alma” and “Dios” (205). In other instances, she simply assigns numbers to the parts, depending on how many voices participate. Gilbert Chase also notes the presence of dialogue in *villancicos* penned by other authors, in which “two voices sang alternately in dialogue with the other two” (296). Chase goes on to argue that the dialogic nature of the

form affords it “a semi-dramatic character and made it an appropriate conclusion for the early eclogues or pastoral plays” (296). Although I appreciate Chase’s recognition of dialogue within the text, I disagree with his assertion that the works are only somewhat dramatic. All of Sor Violante’s *villancicos*, even those that are not dialogic, boast theatricality.

In those that do ask for two or more performers, the playwright indicates how many characters participate by assigning each one a number, or simply by stating their names. An example of a *villancico* divided into *pregunta y respuesta* is found in *A la ascension, Villancico III*, where the questions and answers are obviously dialogic:

- P. Quien me causa la muerte?
- R. La misma vida.
- P. Quien me usurpa la gloria?
- R. La gloria misma. (163)

A S. Juan Baptista en el Jordan, Villancico XXXXV provides a perfect example of characters identified by number. This work contains a short introduction to the subject matter, which is the song of four nymphs who have risen from the waters of the River Jordan to sing praises to John the Baptist. The lines are numbered according to which nymph speaks:

- 1. Baptista soberano:
- 2. Mayor de los nacidos:
- 3. Hechizo de las almas:
- 4. Extasis del sentido: (365)

In other instances, Sor Violante combines these two methods of organization, as in *Al nacimiento, Villancico XXXV*, which includes a numbered list of Christ’s attributes followed by an explanation of his purpose and mission:

- 5. Nó aciertas?
En los zelos te perdiste?

Vaya de baile, y de fiesta.
P. A que viene del Cielo,
Mi niño hermoso? (406)

In this example, the fifth character speaks and is followed by a question, which, in turn, demands a response.

Although numbered parts and the question and answer format appear most often in this collection, two of the *villancicos* found in *Parnaso Lusitano* identify their characters by name. The first, *El alma, y Dios en la Ascencion, Villancico XXXVII*, is, as the title indicates, a conversation between Alma and Dios (205). Another example is *A nuestra Señora de Rosario, Villancico XIII*, in which Don Juan de Austria and Ali Baxá, chief commander of the Ottoman fleet, converse before the historic Battle of Lepanto in which the Spanish defeated the Turks. Don Juan explains to his rival that the Christian soldiers will defeat his army because the Spanish troops have undying faith in the Virgin Mary, who will not let them fail in their quest. Ali Baxá then asks Don Juan about the mother of Christ:

Baxá. Quien es?
D.J. La Reyna del Cielo.
Baxá. Con que vence?
D.J. Con milagros.
Baxá. Que exercita?
D.J. Maravillas. (299)

Additionally, many of Sor Violante's *villancicos* identify the participants within the dialogue, as in *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico XXIX*. The very first *pregunta* begins with "Olá, montañezes," thus identifying a group of characters from the region of Santander (821). We find another example in *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico XXXXIII* in which the performer makes it clear that within the first verse that the characters are young shepherdesses. The first speaker includes herself in this group by use of the *nosotros*

conjugation when she says, “Del prodigio de los hombres, / Del hombre todo prodigios / Que *diremos*, zagalejas, / Que nó parecía delirio?” (850; my emphasis). In some instances, Sor Violante identifies her characters in the title, as in “Al niño Jesus, buena dicha de una Gitana, que le canta” (58).

Costumes, another important theatrical element, certainly played an important role in the original performance of *villancicos*, although the environs of the convent and the practice of wearing habits surely impeded the use of such elaborate costuming as was seen in secular plays of the time period. Nevertheless, several of the *villancicos* do make mention of specific costuming elements, such as “Yá con vestido de pieles / El gran Baptista sale” (370). As is the case with the *comedia*, the convent audience was surely able to understand the nature of a character by his or her costume. Indeed, one simple costume element, such as a pelt, in the case of John the Baptist, would have been enough to identify the character being portrayed. This would have held true for nymphs, angels, and even a *zagal* or *zagaleja*,⁷⁶ as well.

What is more, the music and dancing mentioned in Sor Violante’s texts also point to the dramatic nature of the *villancico*. Music also accompanied *villancicos* and added to their theatricality. In the case of Sor Violante, no extant music exists for her verses. However, *villancico* music was an essential performance element since its composers “sought always to make the music enhance and emphasize the meaning of the words” (Chase 40). Indeed, “instrumentation became an aspect of *villancico* performing tradition that was enjoyed by all” (Taylor 70), and when performed in a church or cathedral, an organ, along with “*chirimías* (shawms), trumpets, sackbuts⁷⁷ and bassoons enriching the

⁷⁶ This term refers to a young shepherd or shepherdess.

⁷⁷ These are more commonly known as bagpipes.

sound of the choir” (Taylor 71), would accompany the piece. When the performers were “separated from the organ by some distance – even out of audible range – the choir was accompanied instead by portable instruments, the harp and viol” (Taylor 70). Some *villancicos*, such as *Al nacimiento, Villancico II* make mention of the use of musical instruments. Here the playwright repeats the phrase “Toquenle las trompetas” (327), while *Al niño Jesus nascido, Villancico V* contains the verse, “Esto un pastor le cantava / Al niño, que en pajas vió, / Y al despedirse le dize / Dulcemente esta canción” (333). The preface to *Villancico VIII*, dedicated to “nuestra Señora del Rosario,” indicates both the identity of the performer and where it was performed. This note reads, “Que cantó una niña en el coro del Convento de la Rosa de Lisboa” (293).⁷⁸ Singing formed an integral part of *villancico* performance. Although introductory explanations such as this one rarely accompany Sor Violante’s works, it is clear that music was an integral part of their performance and it must have greatly enhanced and enriched the experience for both actors and audiences.

An additional theatrical *villancico* element is the use of dance in its presentation. Thomas Taylor indicates that “certain Spanish cathedral traditions include dance as well as drama” and that the large number of *villancico* texts that reference dancing⁷⁹ indicate “that this was a fairly common occurrence in the 16th century, one that could well have continued into the 17th” (73). We see evidence of this in *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico XXXIV*, in which one shepherdess asks another to join her in a celebratory dance. The

⁷⁸ The opening verses of the *villancico* also indicate that a young girl performed this piece. It begins as the child implores her audience to pay attention to her words, even though, “Es muy pequeño mi canto, / Por ser de una voz pequeña, / Y un sugeto limitado.” Anticipating the possible objections of her listeners, she reasons that, “Si bien nó es aquesta empreza / Para tan pequeños años, / Tambien un pequeño arroyo / Dá tribute al Oceano” (293).

⁷⁹ Taylor utilizes the example of “The dance of the *seises*,” in which boy singers in elaborate costumes slowly danced “to dignified choreography” (73) in the Seville Cathedral.

first shepherdess insists, “Salgamos al campo, / Zagala, las dos, / Baylemos un poco, / Ya que bayla el Sol,” to which the second responds, “Que bayle, que fiesta / Se puede hazer oy, / Que festeje en parte / Tan alta ocasión” (351). *Al nacimiento, Villancico XXXII* also underscores the importance of dancing in the last verses. Here the narrator instructs her counterparts by insisting, “A bailar, a bailar, ó zagalejas, / Que es de bailes, y danças es esta fiesta” (84). She goes on to repeat the phrase “a bailar” six more times. This dancing would have been appropriate to the setting, occasion, and characterization of the *villancico*. A nymph ascending from the Jordan River, for example, would move differently than would a young shepherdess in the countryside celebrating a festival dedicated to John the Baptist, and the dancing would be muted enough to be appropriate for the reverent convent setting.

As with the great majority of contemporaneous theater, both secular and religious, these dramatic texts contain no explicit stage directions. Rather, the setting and the names of the characters are found within the verses themselves. Despite this lack, small hints within the works allow us insight into how the performers might have played their roles. For example, the first line of *A S. Juan Baptista en el dia de su Degolacion, Villancico LIX* reads “Olá Querubines divinos” (382), clearly indicating that the voices of the *respuesta* belong to heavenly cherubim. Acting is implied, since the characters are well-known religious, mythological, or stock figures, such as shepherds. These roles would have been familiar to both the audience members and the performers, such that explicit instructions on how to play these roles were unnecessary. The performers would have acted according to a general understanding of stock characters such as these. Since acting is arguably the most essential element of any performance, the actors themselves

contribute greatly to the theatricality of any production.

Danièle Becker supports this by referring to the performers of *villancicos* as “‘actors’ in the dramatic presentations” (qtd. in Laird 19). Since Sor Violante wrote these *villancicos* in the convent, and since many of them specifically reference the Convento da Rosa, the nuns certainly participated in their staging. As in other convent plays, many of these texts directly reflect the space *intramuros* by providing allusions to and commentary on convent life, reminiscent of the fact that “Space is not produced to be read, “but rather in order to be *lived* by people with bodies and lives” (Lefebvre 143). For example, in *El alma, y Dios en la Ascencion, Villancico XXXVII*, the soul speaks of God as her husband, saying, “Mi Dios, mi Señor, mi esposo, / Porque me dexais tan presto?” (205). Since nuns symbolically wed Christ upon taking their vows, the relationship between the soul and God lies at the very heart of female monasticism.

Nuns not only played parts such as Alma and Dios. They also embodied roles such as gypsies, shepherdesses, nymphs, and even the Turkish Ali Baxá and Don Juan de Austria. These works, just like other convent plays, afforded female religious the opportunity to take upon them roles and characters that otherwise would have been prohibited. In fact, not even secular Iberian actresses could play men’s roles, despite the popular *mujer varonil* tradition, and they could certainly not portray divine male figures. This reflects what Margaret Greer calls “the unsettling power of theatre.” Greer explains that during the early modern period, one of the most common complaints in relation to the theater was “the affront to decency posed by having immoral actresses represent the Virgin Mary, or seeing lowly actors play kings and saints” (402). This polemic, perhaps defined as a lack of verisimilitude, disturbed theatergoers and lends insight into the

significance of the roles played by nuns *intramuros*. Within the walls of the cloister, there is no evidence that this lack of verisimilitude, created by nuns masquerading as warriors or even divinity, was disturbing to nun spectators. Thus, Sor Violante and her sisters were able to utilize their cloistered state to their advantage, defying what Spain identifies as “[s]patial segregation,” and which she insists is “one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power” (15). These works allowed them to upend this hierarchy in a unique way.

Some of Sor Violante’s *villancicos* also highlight a self-consciousness in which the dramatic spectacle recognizes itself as such. For example, one of her *villancicos*, *Al Jordan, Villancico XXXIX*, begins with an invitation to listen to the “comedia,” and the beginning verses function much as would a *loa*. The actor invites the audience members to participate by stating, “Vengan a la comedia / Que en el Jordan se hace” (370). The playwright also utilizes the characters to discuss the author of the “comedia,” which, in this case, is God. The second voice asks, “Quien es el autor della?,” to which the first voice responds, “El que todo sabe, / Por ser Autor de todo, / Y en todo incomparable” (370). In this way, the playwright both references the act of writing and alludes to theatrical production, since an *autor* could denote both author and director, in the context of the theater. In other words, God both penned the script and oversaw its execution. Yet another work, *Al Nacimiento, Villancico XXI*, which the playwright dedicated to the birth of Christ, begins, “A la comedia, Señores, / Señores, a la comedia, / Que es rara la compañía, / Y la historia verdadera” (64). By comparing her works to *comedias*, the playwright invokes the common experience of her spectators and prepares them to receive the action of the *villancico* in the same way as they would a secular theatrical

production. In other words, they should be ready to listen, watch, interpret, and internalize. Indeed, the spectators themselves help to define the work and the performance space as theatrical, since “Theatre consists of human beings in a defined space watched by other human beings, and it is this reality that constitutes the basic apparatus of theatre” (McAuley 245). This invitation to participate also allows Sor Violante to utilize the *comedia* as a metaphor, comparing the *autor* to God, the *dama* to the Virgin Mary, and her husband and son, the “Infante divino” (65) to Christ.⁸⁰ She also references “la segunda jornada” and “apariencias” (65) in her text, both clear references to *comedia* performance, and declares “Victor a la comedia” (66) in the last stanza.

Despite the enclosed space in which Sor Violante produced her plays, her works highlight an awareness of secular theater. This allows her to call upon the common knowledge of this theatrical tradition as she creates a space, literally and figuratively speaking, for her unique oeuvre. Her *villancicos* even reference the conflict of appearances versus reality, a common trope in the Spanish *comedia*, which usually manifested itself in the form of cross-dressing, as well as *engaños* and *desengaños*. Unlike the commercial stage however, the convent space is the one place where “las apariencias son todas realidades” (Violante do Ceo 862). Only behind convent walls can the spectators truly trust what they see and hear. The word *apariencias* could also refer to the theatrical convention of uncovering or revealing a surprise on the stage, such as an actor or an object central to the play’s meaning.⁸¹ Beyond this self-referentiality, *Al Nacimiento, Villancico XXI* also reveals its metatheatricality through its subject matter,

⁸⁰ This, of course, reflects the Catholic assertion that Jesus and God are manifestations of the same divine being.

⁸¹ Oftentimes in religious theater, the actors would reveal a religiously significant object onstage at a crucial moment, such as the Eucharist.

as it deals with the baptism ritual. This ordinance itself is a type of theatrical representation, since it replicates the actions of Christ and symbolizes both the cleansing of sin and the beginning of a new life. Indeed, all religious rituals and sacraments are theatrical in nature, from the Eucharist to marriage, and their participants are actors of a sort.

In the case of conventual life, no practice was more theatrical than a novice nun taking her vows. A novice nun utilizes specific performative language as she promises to live a life of poverty, celibacy, and obedience, reminiscent of an actor reciting his lines. Her habit is a costume of sorts, imbued with meaning and symbolizing her commitment. Even her actions are scripted as she makes certain signs and pays obeisance to the unseen bridegroom. Many nun playwrights, such as Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento, celebrated this symbolic marriage to Christ through their dramatic works, and Sor Violante was no exception. The last twenty-one *villancicos* in her collection are all dedicated to specific nuns taking their vows. The titles of many of these works indicate both the name of the novice and the day she entered the convent.

For example, the first of these is titled *A la profesion de una Religiosa, llamada Sor Ana de la Luz, en dia de la Concepcion immaculada de N. S.*, indicating that Sor Ana professed on the day Catholics celebrate the Immaculate Conception.⁸² Yet another reveals that a nun named Doña Margarita de Silva professed in the Convento de Santa Ana in Lisbon on the day of Padre San Francisco.⁸³ Others divulge important

⁸² Currently, this celebration is held annually on December 8.

⁸³ Since this particular profession occurred in another convent, it seems clear that Sor Violante and her sisters, who lived in the Convento da Rosa, had contact with other female religious. It also speaks to the high regard in which Sor Violante was held, as this may have been a commissioned work. Other *villancicos* celebrate nuns who took their vows in the Convento del S.

information, such as family relations. This is the case with *A la profession de D. Juana de Soza hija del Conde de Prado* and *A la profession de Beatriz de los Serafines por apellido Rosa*. A few are simply dedicated to “una Religiosa” (499) or “dós hermanas” (500). The performance of one of these dramatic works creates a dramatic palimpsest in which the theatricality of the rite itself forms the basis for the presentation of the *villancico*. In fact, in the *villancico* dedicated to Sor Ana de la Luz, the playwright indicates that multiple festivities occur not only in the earthly sphere, but in the celestial realm, as well. She insists that “Duplicadas fiestas haze / Oy la celestial region” (491). When the second voice⁸⁴ asks, “Porque causa?,” the first responds with this stanza:

Porque del Sol de Maria
 Soleniza el mismo Dios
 La Concepcion,
 Y de la luz de Ana bella
 La ventura superior,
 Pues subiendo a lo más alto
 Con dichosa profession,
 En splendor, y pureza
 Professa tambien de Sol. (491-92)

In other words, the celebration of the profession of the novice is on par with the reverencing of the Virgin Mary. Thus, Sor Violante creates a parallel between the mother of Christ and Sor Ana, as well as between the theatrical convent space and Heaven itself. In this way, the playwright utilizes theatricality in order to sanction performance within the cloister. If God’s realm is also a theater of sorts, then the convent space can be put to no better use.

Baptista, the Convento de nuestro Padre S. Francisco, the Convento de Chelas, and the Convento de Santa Mónica. All of these convents appear to have been located in Lisbon.

⁸⁴ Sor Violante identifies and differentiates between the two voices by utilizing the P. (pregunta) and R. (respuesta) format seen in many of her *villancicos*.

Danièle Becker also notes that *villancico* performance was metatheatrical and self-conscious, as she points out that these “dramatic presentations” were addressed “to the public of the faithful” (qtd. in Laird 19). What is more, no fourth wall existed in the convent space, as was the case in theatrical spaces such as *corrales*, town *plazas*, and churches, all of which lacked a proscenium arch. In these and other settings, the audience became part of the production because of their proximity to the performing space, which is due to the nature of early modern Iberian theater itself. The spectators sat or stood all around the actors and interacted with them, either of their own accord or in response to cues given by the performers. In *villancico* performance there was an awareness of this theatricality and oftentimes the players directly addressed the audience.

Unlike in commercial theaters, however, theatricality in the convent is not produced by the space, but rather must occur despite the space in which the actors perform. There is nothing about convent space that modern theatergoers would recognize as theatrical. There was no stage, no clearly delineated seating space, no wings, and no backstage. Rather, the convent recreation room would have been a democratic and very inclusive theatrical space, with no real separation between what Gay McAuley calls ‘audience space’ and ‘practitioner space.’ Nevertheless, the presence of actors and audience members, combined with theatrical production, can transform any space into a theatrical space.⁸⁵ Speaking of theatrical space as it relates to spectators, McAuley argues that the spectator maintains a “dual consciousness” because he or she is “present in the theatre, physically located in a given place, subliminally aware at all times of their

⁸⁵ McAuley distinguishes between ‘theatre space,’ defined as the physical place where the performance occurs, and ‘theatrical space,’ which is also referred to as ‘performance space.’ This alludes to the idea that each production creates its own theatrical space, which includes both actors and spectators.

surroundings, the responses of their neighbors, and the materiality of stage, set, and performance, that the dramatic fiction is always undercut” (279). The other side of this coin, of course, is that the reality of the situation, in which the spectator recognizes the actors as such, is also undercut. This ‘dual consciousness’ vacillates between reality and fiction while giving credence to both.

The close proximity of spectator and actor was certainly most intense in a convent setting. Unfortunately, as is the case with Sor Maria do Ceo’s cloister, Sor Violante do Ceo’s convent no longer exists, having been destroyed by the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the subsequent fires which ravaged Portugal’s capital city.⁸⁶ There is no way to know exactly where the nuns performed or what that space might have looked like. Nevertheless, studies of other convent spaces indicate that this cloister most likely housed a *sala de recreo*, similar to the one located in Sor Cecilia and Sor Maria’s convent in Valladolid. Depictions of Lisbon before 1755 show that the convent is laid out much like its Iberian counterparts, with a central open patio surrounded by enclosed rooms, and attached to a larger building, presumably a chapel. It seems safe to say that convent construction did not vary greatly, and that the same essential spaces existed in all cloisters. Therefore, whether the nuns acted in the recreation room or the convent garden, the minimal distance between performers and audience members served to accentuate the liminal nature of theater, since it exists between fiction and reality. As McAuley explains, drama is involved in the play between “reality and unreality, absence and presence, here and not-here, now and not-now, and the spectator in the theatre enters into a game that stops this side of madness but that functions to throw into question our ‘normal’ modes of

⁸⁶ The Museu da Cidade in Lisbon contains depictions of the city as it stood before the fire. These clearly show the Convento da Rosa located on a hill, situated directly beneath the Castelo de São Jorge, which still stands overlooking the city.

apprehension of the real” (255). This unique space and the constant shifting between reality and illusion allowed for a subtle yet powerful subversion.

Only *intramuros* could these female religious embody lower-class women, mythical figures, non-Christian entities, male political leaders, and even divinity without fear of retribution. Spatial theory supports this idea by recognizing spatial practice as both text and tactic. Lefebvre insists that “spaces contain messages” (131), while Certeau points out that the space in which tactics are carried out belongs to the other, necessarily functioning within the boundaries set by an extraneous force (37). The nuns took full advantage of their cloistered state by utilizing their enclosure to empower themselves through theater. They usurped the terrain of a ‘foreign power,’ so to speak, in order to give themselves a voice of authority. Even in cases when the nuns were not playing authoritative roles, the mere fact that their voices served to call to worship or repentance placed them in positions of power. This reflected the fact, as Asunción Lavrin explains, that “nuns had complete autonomy and exercised full control over themselves. The routine of daily life and the internal management of the convent were aptly carried out by a well-established hierarchy and respected order among the members of the community” (121). She also points out that “Convents were the only known institutions that women ran by themselves; religious women assumed positions of responsibility which they would perform following their own sensibilities as women” (123). The *villancicos* evidenced the autonomy, control, and sensibility of the nuns by affording their players a voice with an import comparable to that of male clerics. For the most part, women governed themselves within the walls of the convent, notwithstanding the fact that this

gendered space was subjected to male oversight. This governance even extended to religious matters, such as those discussed in Sor Violante's works.

This is evidenced by the fact that female religious communicated directly with the divine, eschewing clerical intercession. Lavrin explains that in the convent setting, "male figures exercised control over the nuns' spiritual lives in ways that transcended their role as a source of religious guidance. They were the repository of the nuns' innermost thoughts, and they were trusted and valuable advisors in all that mattered in religion" (9). Nevertheless, in *villancicos* such as *Al Nacimiento, Villancico XXVI*, these women could call directly upon their God and beseech him to listen to their praise. In this *villancico*, the speaker demands, "Oyga, Señor potentado / Del encarnado reboço, / Oyga el menor de sus triunfos, / Y el mayor de sus abonos" (72). They could also express tender feelings of love for their maker by utilizing tropes and idioms that stem from the mystic tradition and are reminiscent of the language of courtly love. In *Al Nacimiento, Villancico XXVII*, the performer refers to Christ as "Mi galan desenojado," and calls him "tierno," and "dueño de mis ojos" (73). Hence, the playwright references the vows she and her sisters took as brides of Christ, and utilizes their role as wives to foment a personal and intimate relationship with the divine.

Other works utilize language games in their praise, serving as a showcase for the playwright's skill with rhetoric. On such example is *Al Nacimiento, Villancico XXXII*. In this work, the characters each take a letter comprising Jesus's name, and expound upon his virtues by way of alliteration. For example, the performer with the letter J calls him "jues" and "justo," while the one who picked the letter S claims he is "Sol de justicia, suave / Seguro, y de luz suprema, / Sacramento soberano, / Y sabedoria eternal" (83).

Deftly playing with language in this way directly counters the philosophies of early modern thinkers such as the Valencian Juan Luis Vives, who insists in his *De institutione foeminae Christianae* that “While a woman may possess the ability to understand language, she is discouraged from developing the rhetorical tools that would permit her to employ language in any effective manner” (Carrión 12-13). Sor Violante clearly defies this counsel through her writing, as did her sisters through their performance of the *villancicos*. Gabriela Carrión explains that not only were early modern women expected to be silent, but they were also to avoid communicating through gestures or facial expressions. Therefore, the sisters performing the *villancicos* also ignored Vives’s advice, since “Such a recommendation would be radically reversed by the exigencies of the dramatic genre that communicates precisely by means of such gestures” (Carrión 13). Thus, these dramatic works doubly defied gender norms of the day through both their language and their performance.

The most striking example of playacting as subversion is *El alma, y Dios en la Ascension, Villancico XXXVII*. As in other convent plays, particularly those by Sor Marcela de San Félix, playing the role of Alma allows the actor to stand in both for female religious and humankind. Lavrin points out that in convent writing, “Nuns were intentionally portrayed as women strong in their determination and faith, a characterization that ran contrary to the weakness of character attributed to most lay women” (321). Rather than give in to traditional portrayals of women as weak-willed and feeble-minded, Sor Violante’s Alma, although clearly subject to Dios as his willing bride, both communicates her knowledge of Christ’s redemptive mission and expresses her deep and constant feelings of love for him. Although Alma’s initial interactions with Dios

are inquiries, they stem not from ignorance, but instead function as rhetorical questions. She asks her beloved why he must leave her so soon and why he must return to the heavens from whence he came. When he answers that he will never truly leave her and that his earthly undertaking has been fulfilled, she replies, “Bien sé, Señor, que venistes / Solo a padecer tormentos” (205). She entreats him to stay, but when he insists that he can help her from afar, she responds, “Bien sé, dueño soberano / Que es vuestro poder inmenso” (205). Later, Dios praises both Alma and the religious women she represents when he declares, “Dichosa el alma, que sabe / Dar a su amor tal empleo” (206). Their constancy in the love they feel for Christ stands in stark contrast to the fickleness that is supposedly inherent to women.

The character of Alma is not unique to Sor Violante’s drama,⁸⁷ but the character of Dios most certainly is. Other convent plays do indeed feature divine figures, but always indirectly.⁸⁸ Nun playwrights will portray Christ as a shepherd or a bridegroom, but only this *villancico* features God as himself. Lavrin argues, “The cloisters were unique female worlds with an idiosyncratic blend of beliefs and religious observance, social consciousness and social practices” (18). This particular *villancico* reflects Lavrin’s insistence that the unique convent space allowed an ‘idiosyncratic blend’ to flourish. No other early modern setting would permit a woman, religious or secular, to directly portray a divine figure. In this case, Dios, as is to be expected, serves as the ultimate authority, but also evidences his tender feelings for Alma through his dialogue. He gently reassures her with lines like “nó te dexo” (205) and “Siempre contigo me

⁸⁷ Alma plays a central an essential role in Sor Marcela de San Felix’s *coloquios espirituales*, as discussed in the first chapter.

⁸⁸ This occurs often in Sor Maria do Ceo’s allegorical plays, in which Christ is always represented indirectly. Sor Marcela, as well, utilizes allegory in order to indirectly treat sacred subjects.

quedo” (206). He also entreats her to remain faithful in her devotion to him when he insists, “Quiereme tu siempre firme” (206). Rather than chastise his mourning spouse, the Christ figure alleviates her fears, thus showing a deep-seated investment in her and a compassionate recognition of her apprehensions. This reflects the monastic philosophy that “Christ symbolized the role of all good husbands in protecting their wives. In return the bride would serve her husband and become a source of solace for him” (Lavrin 79). Although a sense of subservience indeed permeates *villancicos* such as this one, the bridegroom is portrayed as a gentle and loving spouse rather than as a wrathful enforcer of commandments.

In this instance, the playwright clearly emphasizes Dios’s role as a devoted husband rather than focusing on his omnipotence. In fact, Alma’s closing lines best reflect the sentiment of the piece. She bids farewell to Dios, calling him, “luz de mis ojos, / Que tierra, y Cielo / Nuestro amor solemnizan / Con dulces versos. / Oh que tiernos amantes / Divide el Cielo / En una alma rendida, / Y un Dios inmenso! / Mas oh que extremos, / Pues de tiernos ostentan / Lo que de eternos!” (207). These verses recognize the pair first as tender lovers, and second as Alma and Dios. The particular place and practice of convent space meant that, “Love, symbolic as it might have been, found numberless forms of expression in a variety of writings that kindled the spiritual liaison between the nun and her groom” (Lavrin 90). The other *villancicos* dedicated to the ascension of Christ also allowed for the explicit expression of the love created by this ‘spiritual liason.’ For example, in *A la Ascencion, Villancico XXXVIII*, the first voice, designated by the abbreviation P, standing for *pregunta*, asks, “Dizidme, que puede hazer / Una alma, que siendo amante / Queda ausente de su bien?” (207). Sor Violante

identifies the soul with a feminine indefinite article as a way to indicate that, in this case, the character of the soul relates specifically to female religious, rather than being representative of all humankind. She is concerned primarily with women's relationships with God. What is more, she once again employs the term *amante* when referring to Christ,⁸⁹ underscoring the importance of the mystic tradition in the early modern Iberian convent.

Intriguingly, the following *villancico*, *A la Ascension*, *Villancico XXXIX*, also dedicated to the Ascension, emphasizes the humanity of Christ over his divinity. This piece features only one character, which is unnamed, which we can assume to be Alma or perhaps a nun. She begins by calling her beloved "Galan de los ojos verdes" (208) and juxtaposes the heights to which he ascends with the lowliness of his earthly state. For instance, she insists "A fé que por más que suba, / Que tambien ha de baxar," and emphasizes his humble birth, born destitute in a manger. This comparison serves to explore Christ's dual nature as simultaneously human and divine, and to connect him to the female character narrating the *villancico*, and therefore to the members of the audience. As the final stanza explains, "Mas subiendo tan alto, / Muchos dizen yá, / Que con ciertas palabras / Le han de hazer bajar" (209). Although at first glance, this seems like a repetitious bookend to the work's initial verses, in this case, Christ will descend not to inhabit a body of flesh and blood, but to commune directly with the speaker.

The "ciertas palabras" that she mentions reference sacrament prayers said in order to convert bread and wine into flesh and blood, according to Catholic belief. Although Christ resides in the heavens, these 'certain words' necessarily compel him to descend to

⁸⁹ Sor Violante uses the word *amante* four more times in this *villancico*, referring both to the soul and to Christ, who is identified as "Un amante, que es tan soberano," and "Aquel divino amante" (208).

earth. Beyond this meaning, however, these lines could also allude to individual prayers uttered in an effort to establish an intimate relationship with the divine. Christ's earthly tenure as a green-eyed gentleman allows him to connect personally with his supplicant, herself all too human. The playwright often employs similes and metaphors such as this one in her texts, comparing Christ to a phoenix, ice, a lover, a man, a shepherd, a flower, a monarch, a child, a prince, a country youth, a lion, a doctor, a composer, a bird, wheat, snow, a teacher, an eagle, and a captain. She utilizes these comparisons in order to help her audience better understand the nature of divinity through associations with the common and even the mundane. Her works evidence a personalization of institutional Catholic theology.

Although it may be true that “‘Gendered spaces’ separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege” (Spain 3), the convent also enabled a different kind of knowledge to thrive. Rather than focusing on the official and formal aspects of the Catholic faith, these *villancicos* emphasize the more personal facets of the religion. Within the cloister, women did indeed participate in ceremonies, rituals, and sacraments deemed essential for salvation. Nevertheless, they also engaged in personal communication with the divine, as they operated, for the most part, beyond the reach of church and its ecclesiastical leaders by creating and living in the liminal space between orthodoxy and heresy. As Lavrin observes, the convent was “a territory designed for women, populated by women, and shaped by them in their own fashion, despite the intrusion of male oversight” (355). Sor Violante skillfully employs the language of the mystical tradition in order to successfully navigate the potentially subversive convent space while still holding true to official church doctrine.

This tactic falls in line with Certeau's insistence that such devices are "an art of the weak" (37) used to resist hegemonic systems of power. Certeau explains that a method such as this "must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse" (37). In other words, despite the orthodox appearance of Sor Violante's dramatic works, we find in them a feminist undercurrent sustained and supported by the convent space itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in her most surprising work, *Villancico XIII*, dedicated "A nuestra Señora del Rosario," which calls for the actors interpreting the piece to play the roles of the Catholic Don Juan of Austria and a Turkish Muslim named Ali Baxá.⁹⁰

In this *villancico*, Ali Baxá begins the play by calling upon his troops to sound a bellicose trumpet so loudly that their enemies will know of the power of the Ottoman army. Don Juan answers by intimating that his rival's action reveals his fear. Baxá, of course, refutes this notion by mocking the weakness of the Christian army, noting that the Turks greatly outnumber them. Calling upon Catholic doctrine, Don Juan explains that true victory is not found "En baxeles, flechas, y arcos, / Sinó en favors divinos / Sobre valores humanos" (299). This is the victory that the Virgin Mary will grant them. This piques Baxá's interest, and the two have a long repartee in which the Ottoman admiral asks pointed questions about the mother of Christ as Don Juan provides succinct answers. This dialogue does not only reveal Don Juan's immovable faith, but it also alludes to Baxá's insecurities about both his military and spiritual positions. When the Turk asks

⁹⁰ Also known as Ali Pasha, or Műezzinzade Ali Paşa in Turkish, he was the admiral of the imperial fleet from 1569 until he led the Turks into the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. There his galley, Sultana, fought Don Juan's ship, La Real, until he was shot in the head with a musket and subsequently decapitated by Spanish soldiers, who stuck his head on a pike in an effort to undermine the morale of the Ottoman troops.

about the rosary, Don Juan explains that it contains “Altos misterios,” to which Baxá apprehensively responds, “Puede mucho?” (299). The conversation ends as the two decide to put their respective faiths to the test in battle. Here two other voices⁹¹ take over the narration, one taking the side of the Turkish troops and the other encouraging the Catholic soldiers. These two roles create dramatic tension as they engage in a verbal and rhetorical battle reflective of the actual confrontation at Lepanto. They employ vivid color imagery, calling the sea “el ceruleo campo” and demanding, “Vistase de carmin el Oceano” (300). They also juxtapose the crescent moon of the Ottoman Empire with the shining sun of the rosary and exclaim the battle cry, “Al arma, al arma, guerra, guerra” (300) until it becomes clear that the Christians have overcome their enemies. They ascribe this victory solely to the Virgin Mary.

Since we know that in other convents, such as Sor Cecilia and Sor María’s convent in Valladolid, the nuns employed costumes and props in their performances, we can infer that the nuns in the Convento da Rosa must have also utilized costuming elements in order to identify themselves as the two military leaders. Something as simple as a sword, a sash, or a headdress could have sufficed to transform a nun into a powerful (male) figure. The audience, of course, would have recognized the players simultaneously as actors and as the characters they portray, indicative of one of the ‘dangers’ of theater. McAuley expounds on this concept, explaining that, “Theatrical performance occurs live, in real space and time, and the fiction (to the extent that there is one) is always grounded in the lived reality of both performers and spectators” (252). The reality of the actors and the place where they perform, yet another manifestation of Certeau’s assertion that space is a “practiced place” (130), combined with the willing suspension of disbelief of the

⁹¹ These two voices are labeled only as “1.” and “2.”

audience, designates convent space once again as a paradoxical geography and allows the playwright to 'poach' in the cracks of proprietary powers.

The nun actors played both female religious leaders and male military commanders, embodying an oxymoronic juxtaposition of humility and pride, impotence and power, weakness and strength. They could simultaneously fulfill their role as brides of Christ and live vicariously through their characters, all while reinforcing their own faith. In point of fact, female religious often employed the warrior metaphor to understand and discuss their experience, comparing spiritual struggles to the hardships of war. Asunción Lavrin explains that by the time a young novice takes her vows, "love has already waged a battle to defeat worldly temptations[.] The metaphor of triumph and conquest over self and evil conferred on nuns as women of valor and strength of soldiers sustained by the love of Christ" (91). Thus, the portrayal of military men fighting for what they believed to be right helped furthered the nuns' understanding of their own trials and tribulations. This is because these women had, in fact, already conquered in their own right, and continued to wage war against the evils of the world and, sometimes, even against themselves. Notwithstanding the appropriate nature of the metaphor, a woman could never have played such a role outside the confines of the convent.

This particular use of a military motif was not the only surprising way in which the playwright undermined the notion that "Both sexes subscribe to the spatial arrangements that reinforce differential access to knowledge, resources, and power: men because it serves their interests, and women because they may perceive no alternative" (Spain 18). Yet another of Sor Violante's works calls upon the very Portuguese tradition of naval exploration. One of the few that the playwright penned in her mother tongue, *A*

nossa Senhora do Rosario, *Villancico XI* begins by inviting the audience members⁹² to set sail “No mar da mais bella Aurora, / Que sendo o mar de Maria, / Será o porto o da Gloria” (296). The poetic voice calls upon the spectators to navigate fearlessly towards the divine North Star, the Virgin Mary, in order to arrive at the port of Glory by sailing in the ship of the Rosary upon seas of roses.

Still another *villancico*, *A nuestra Señora del Socorro*, *Villancico II*, evokes the motif of war once again as it rouses its listeners with cries of “Animo a la pelea / De los peligros varios, / Que tenemos socorro soberano” and “Terminen la bataria / Los contrarios más forçosos, / Que la Reyna de los Cielos / Nos assegura despojos” (306). A third play, *Al Arcangel S. Miguel*, *Villancico I*, dedicated to the archangel Michael and part of a set meant to be performed during the celebration of the “Santos da Gloria,” calls yet again upon the traditional war metaphor. The speaker identifies Michael as “Capitan divino” and “bello guerrero” and urges him to “Salid, salid a campaña” (311) in order to defeat the malevolent Luzbelo, or Satan. Although in these cases the performers do not play the part of the mariner, the warrior, and the divine captain, these *villancicos* nevertheless allow the nuns to utilize the language of war. *Al Arcangel S. Miguel* even echoes the exchange between Ali Baxá and Don Juan when the poetic voice declares, “Al arma, al arma, al arma / Guerra, guerra” (312). These examples indicate that through the performance of these dramatic works, nuns could simultaneously be sailors, soldiers, and sisters.

⁹² This *villancico* is addressed to “senhores” (296), which appears to indicate that it was intended for an audience comprised of both men and women. It is probable that Sor Violante meant for the piece to be sung as part of liturgical service, and a nun most likely would have performed it from behind the grill separating the private convent space from the public chapel space. The nautical theme certainly would have resonated with the inhabitants of early modern Lisbon.

Not only could Sor Violante and the other nuns in her convent break gender roles through their acting, but they could escape the constraints of their socio-economic status, as well. They could call on the popular pastoral tradition as they played shepherds and shepherdesses, as in many of the large number of *villancicos* dedicated to John the Baptist. In *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico VII*, the speaker announces to her fellow “Zagalejas,” “Muero de amores por Juan” (318), reminiscent of secular pastoral plays centered on the love between a shepherd and a shepherdess. The second voice in *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico VIII* calls upon the other “Zagalas” in the play to dance “Un bayle de dós en dós” (320) in honor of the Baptist. *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico X* conflates the difference between the fictional shepherdesses and the actual nuns participating in the performance as it entreats “Virgenes” (323)⁹³ to applaud and celebrate the saint, both in their playacting and their real life. Perhaps most tellingly, several of the *villancicos* in this particular section call upon the performers to sing and dance. These actions would presumably not have been based on the courtly dances and songs of the time period, acceptable for the middle and upper-class women inhabiting the Convento da Rosa, but rather upon a more rustic performance tradition. In fact, *A S. Juan Baptista, Villancico XI* even indicates what instruments should be used. It reads, “Hagan fiesta los zagales / Con sonajas, y rabel” (323).⁹⁴ It also designates that the saint should be praised

⁹³ Although it is true that widows sometimes opted for conventual life as a way to maintain the public notion of their virtue, many nuns entered the convent at a young age, supposedly having adhered strictly to the precepts of the Catholic Church, which banned sexual relations outside of marriage. Therefore, the nuns were assumed to be virgins, despite the fact that still others joined the convent precisely because they had lost their honor, whether due to their own actions or as a result of some kind of abuse.

⁹⁴ The *sonaja* is a type of rattle, and could be made with a wide variety of materials, from metal disks fastened to a curved piece of wood to a gourd filled with pebbles. The Real Academia Española identifies it as a rustic instrument. A *rabel* is a string instrument that originated in the

“Con fiestas, bayles, y danças” (323) and that the participants should applaud him and sing his praises as “Victor.” This singing, dancing, applauding, and playing instruments stand in stark contrast to our notion of convent life. Yet it was precisely the cloistered space that allowed for such revelry to occur. The nuns’ enclosure, meant to control them, often served to free them.

Lefebvre astutely notes that “Among non-verbal signifying sets must be included music, painting, sculpture, architecture, and certainly theatre, which in addition to a text or pretext embraces gesture, masks, costume, a stage, a *mise-en-scène* — in short, a space” (62). Each of the theatrical elements in Sor Violante’s works, then, signifies. This supports Spain’s statement that “Everything that occurs onstage is perceived as potentially meaningful by spectators” (42). Meaning is not limited to the plot and the actions, but includes props, costumes, and any other element used to enhance the performance. Along the same lines, Certeau asserts that “popular procedures (also ‘miniscule’ and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them” (xiv). In the case of the *villancicos*, it is not necessarily the quotidian that manipulates the mechanisms of discipline, but the theatrical. The clear orthodoxy of praising John the Baptist allows for the surprising unorthodoxy of singing, dancing, and acting nuns, and the unorthodoxy of these actions challenges, in a subtle way, the Catholic church’s insistence on controlling and enclosing female religious. This enclosure resulted in a “self-ruled society of women” (Lavrin 352) that did not fully submit to patriarchal institutional authority, but rather utilized its marginal position to explore identities and modes of expression not afforded to secular women.

Islamic world and made its way to the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. It is a likely precursor to the modern-day violin and is still played in Chile.

Sor Violante's *villancicos* were clearly theatrical, as evidenced by the singing, dancing, costuming, and acting they required. If we view them as merely religious verse, we allow ourselves an extremely limited vision of their purpose and artistry. They also evidence what Lavrin calls, "a common language: that of cloistered women whose confined lives shaped their thematic choices and modes of expression" (348). They were shaped both by their physical environment and by the practices carried out within the convent. Some are more obviously theatrical than others, but she wrote them with performance in mind, thus designating the convent as a theatrical space and involving all the nuns in their production. As McAuley points out, "Theatre is a place where fiction and reality come together to problematize each other. What is presented in performance is always both real and not real, and there is constant interplay between the two potentialities, neither of which is completely realized" (127). On one hand, it was acceptable for the nuns to take on forbidden roles because the spectacle was not real. On the other hand, it was dangerous precisely because of the element of reality that exists in theatrical productions. The space is not the only element that feeds into this oxymoronic dichotomy. The performance itself also contributes. If we subscribe to the idea that "Spectators in the theatre both believe and disbelieve" (McAuley 39), allowing the audience to recognize the players simultaneously as actors and as the characters they portrayed, then convent theater is indeed subversive. Consequently, the space of the convent serves as a "transdisciplinary standpoint or location from which to see and to be seen, to give voice and assert radical subjectivity" (Soja 104). Literary critics have largely ignored *villancicos* for almost three hundred years, but their dramatic and

theatrical nature allowed for a 'radical subjectivity' to thrive. They deserve to be reexamined and reevaluated.

CONCLUSION

“Here is the opportunity to seek and find an essentially feminine space.”
Asunción Lavrin

The cultural significance of theater in early modern Spain and Portugal cannot be overstated. The Iberian Peninsula’s theatrical tradition is long-standing, and has its roots in the medieval liturgical drama used to celebrate important and significant festivities, such as Christmas, Corpus Christi, and Easter. These liturgical plays, including *autos sacramentales*, paved the way for other forms of religious theater, most notably in convents, in Jesuit schools, and in missionary work abroad. Religious drama also gave rise to secular forms of theater, including the *loa*, the *entremés*, and, most significantly, the *comedia*. The importance and appeal of the *comedia* is illustrated by its performance space – the *corral*. This unique setting, although strictly segregated, was quite democratic, in that it allowed men and women, ecclesiastical and secular leaders, and nobility and laymen to attend without prejudice. *Loas* and *entremeses*, of course, reached the same audiences, since they occurred, respectively, before the play and between each of the three acts. Convent theater, by contrast, is exceptionally private and reached a comparatively limited audience. Despite the fact that the members of the convent lived apart from the world, the more public forms of theater still exercised a large amount of influence over the dramatic works written and performed *intramuros*. In point of fact, this influence is distinctly discernible in the dramatic works of nuns such as Sor María de San

Félix, Sor Violante do Ceo, Sor Cecilia del Nacimiento, Sor María de San Alberto, and Maria do Ceo.

Although it is true that cloistered nuns were forced to limit their contact with the outside world, it is imperative to realize that many of them were exposed to secular theater, as well as to playwrights and actors themselves, before entering the convent. Such was the case with Sor Marcela de San Félix. As the daughter of the famed playwright Lope de Vega and his actress mistress, Micaela de Luján, Marcela was keenly aware of and involved in the world of theater in Madrid as a young girl. In fact, Barbara Mujica points out that Sor Marcela's childhood was marked by her father's "libelos, litigaciones e intensas rivalidades con otros escritores" (*Women Writers* 194). Additionally, Melveena McKendrick notes that Guillén de Castro "dedicated the first part of his plays . . . to Lope's daughter Marcela" (93), thus evidencing that she moved within secular theater circles before taking her vows. Sor Marcela's involvement with and awareness of the creation and staging of plays, carrying works from page to stage, as it were, reveals her familiarity with and appreciation of theatrical production. Additionally, Sor Violante do Ceo, a Portuguese nun playwright best known for her poetry, also moved within important literary circles. She lived in the Convento de Nossa Senhora da Rosa da Ordem do Grande Patriarca Santo Domingos in Lisbon, and not only did she take part in *certámenes* alongside Portuguese noblemen and women, but the members of the nobility widely publicized and praised her talent. Her cloistered status did not impede her from participating in the secular world. Lay sisters operated in the secular world with even more liberty.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Dona Joanna Theodora de Sousa, a Portuguese playwright, was a lay sister who lived in the Convento da Rosa in Lisbon. Although we know very little about her life, her status as a lay sister

Thus we see that secular theater had an impact on the private religious drama written and performed within the convent. Not all public theater was secular, however. Despite their very public nature, the religious aims of *autos sacramentales* make this particular type of spectacle a perfect starting point for situating convent theater within Iberian drama at large. Playwrights wrote *autos sacramentales*, one-act allegorical plays about the mystical nature of the Eucharist, for performance as part of the Corpus Christi festival. As Lope de Vega defines them in his *Loa entre un villano y una labradora*, they are “Comedias / a honor y gloria del pan” (143). Since convent theater does not usually center on the Eucharist, the most noticeable shared characteristic between plays by nuns and *autos sacramentales* is not their theme, but rather their pronounced use of allegory. Sor Marcela de San Félix’s *coloquios espirituales* provide an excellent example of allegorical convent theater. The playwright wrote her collection of colloquies as an extended allegory, in which the protagonist, Alma, navigates the perils of mortal existence. This character served as a direct reflection or representation of each of the spectators as well as the actresses within the convent. The author clearly intended for her sisters to identify with Alma and follow her example in order to be successful in their spiritual endeavors. As in Lope de Vega’s *Auto de las cortes de la muerte*, Sor Marcela’s central figure must also pass through many temptations and difficulties before gaining her eternal reward. Additionally, just as Lope’s protagonist, *El hombre*, is helped through his several trials by an angelic guide, *Alma* is not left to her own devices, but rather

meant that she was not bound by the strict rules of the cloister set forth by the sixteenth-century Council of Trent. Perhaps Dona Joanna incorporated so many elements of public theatre into her own drama since her status meant she was free of the church authorities’ unrelenting “insistence upon the enclosure of the convents” (Weaver 23). Like other lay sisters, she had more freedom to venture out into and participate in the outside world.

comforted and led by a trio of virtues in female form, known as Desnudez, Oración, and Mortificación.

Additionally, Sor Maria do Ceo's works provide another exceptional example of the allegorical nature of many convent plays, especially her collection of five *autos* dedicated to the Virgin Mary, titled *Triunfo do Rosário*. Here Sor Maria creates different levels of meaning within her allegory, as she plays with the terms rose, rosary, and rose garden. Each of these terms makes reference to and represents the mother of Christ. In *La flor de las finezas*, Clemencia restores Hombre to the good graces of the king, indicating that the mercy of Christ is primarily accessible through Mary. *Rosal de Maria* features a shepherdess named Gracia who unites Almaná with Adonis, or Christ, pointing to Mary's role as intercessor. *Perla, y Rosa* tells of a shepherd who leaves his flock to search for the lost Perla, thus mirroring the biblical parable of the good shepherd. Sor Maria enhances the original allegory, however, by altering it so that Rosa, representative of Mary, is the one who ultimately leads the straying *serrana* back to her caretaker. The penultimate play in the set is *Las rosas con las espigas*, which references the sacrament, and in this way very closely approximates an *auto sacramental*. Here the playwright features Flor, an indirect reference to the Virgin, as she readies herself for the Bridegroom's marriage feast. The last *auto* of the collection, *Trez redenciones del hombre*, is divided into three sections, as the title indicates. In the first and second, Gracia appears to redeem Hombre from Culpa. In the third, Dama gives Hombre a gift of one hundred and fifty roses, representing the rosary, which will lead him out of the labyrinth of sin and back to Gracia. In this way, the author connects roses with rosary, and illustrates their metonymic connection to the Virgin Mary and salvation. Both Sor Marcela and Sor Maria evidence a

didacticism in their plays that is exactly in keeping with the purpose and feel of *autos sacramentales*.

Notwithstanding their great influence, these religious plays were not the only public theatrical form to impact convent theater. The popular *comedia* also influenced nuns' plays in a very significant way. Unlike the vast majority of convent theater, the *comedia* is composed of three acts, is about 3,000 lines long, and can have virtually any topic, from saints' lives to mythology, to history. Themes of love, honor, and religion, however, permeate these plays no matter their subject matter. They can be comic or tragic and are often quite self-conscious. They center on characters from the nobility, specifically *damas* and *galanes*, but also include figures from lower levels of society, such as the *criados*. Although I am only aware of one convent play that strictly follows the *comedia* format,⁹⁶ many other elements of this type of secular drama can be found in nuns' plays.

Like the *comedia*, much of convent theater also focuses on or features themes such as love and honor, albeit in its own unique way. In her first colloquy, *La muerte del*

⁹⁶ Dona Joanna Theodora de Souza penned a *comedia* titled *El gran prodigio de España, y lealtad de un amigo*. A fascinating hybrid of *comedia*, hagiography, and church play, this work about the life of a lesser-known Spanish saint features two *mujeres varoniles* and an irresistibly strong Virgin Mary character. It tells the story of the trials faced by a young man who will someday become San Pedro Gonçalves. In order to do so, he must escape the temptations of the Devil, who entices him to love the beautiful Beliza, despite his declaration that he hopes never to love, since he wishes to remain “sin prizion, ni esclavitud” (2a). Dona Joanna's work follows exactly Lope's suggestion that authors should write *comedias* in three acts, and that the first act should introduce the action, the second should develop it, and the third resolve it. She also employs romantic entanglements and exhibits a preoccupation with love and honor, since “los casos de honra son mejores / porque mueven con fuerza a toda gente” (Vega Carpio, *Arte Nuevo* 327-28). Dona Joanna shares Lope's affinity for word play and linguistic and literal confusions, as well, and even makes use of the *mujer varonil* trope, as evident in the scene when Beliza not only shoots Felicio, but then goes on to best Liodoro in a swordfight, leaving both men injured. Notwithstanding the characteristics it shares with more secular theatre, this play's religious nature and moralizing effect reveals that it closely follows in the footsteps of the *comedias de santos* written by playwrights such as Lope de Vega, Mira de Amescua, and Calderón de la Barca.

apetito, Sor Marcela characterizes the antagonist, *Apetito*, as a handsome *galán* who courts Alma. Much like the *galanes* in *comedias*, this one also attempts to entice the *dama* to give in to her appetite, which is a dangerous prospect as far as her salvation is concerned. In her *La estimación de la religión*, Sor Marcela also characterizes Mundo as a wealthy gentleman. Here the playwright draws on the Spanish code of honor in order to emphasize the moral and physical danger caused by Mundo's presence in Alma's house, just as the presence of a *galán* in the house of a *dama* could permanently damage her reputation, seriously endanger her future prospects, and even put her life at risk. The theme of love is also central to Sor Maria's *auto*, *Clavel, y Rosa*, in which Rosa, signifying the Virgin, must choose between several suitors, represented by different types of flowers. Lyrio and Narciso both attempt unsuccessfully to woo Rosa, and only Clavel, symbolizing Joseph, is humble and respectful enough to merit her attention. Sor Maria utilizes the theme of romantic love to retell a biblical narrative in a new way. The question of love leads to concerns about honor, as well, thus mirroring *comedia* conventions. At the beginning of Sor Marcela's third colloquy, *De virtudes*, Oración chides her inconstant friend, asking her what her husband would think of her behavior, thus informing the spectators that Alma has already taken her spiritual vows in order to become the bride of Christ. From this point on, Alma's decisions, actions, and conduct will affect not only her, but her husband, as well. In this way, Sor Marcela seamlessly integrates a quintessential Spanish societal norm into a Catholic allegory of redemption.

In addition to the use of common themes, nun playwrights employed many conventions of the *comedia* in convent theater, as well. For one, stage directions, scene changes, props, and costuming are usually embedded in the text rather than appearing in

the margins or as preliminary instructions, as in modern drama. For example, in Sor María's *Clavel, y Rosa*, the text suggests that the male characters' flower costumes indicate their characterization. The script does not directly mention or describe these costumes, and so we can only imagine how the actresses may have been outfitted. Nevertheless, it seems clear that costuming was an essential element of this play. Evidence of the use of props is also embedded in these texts. For example, in Sor Marcela's *La muerte del Apetito*, the reader only discovers that Mortificación possesses a sword in the moment she uses it to run Apetito through. The fact that nun playwrights did not explicitly mention costuming, props, and stage directions may frustrate modern theater practitioners, but early modern directors and actors knew to scour the texts for these clues. This does not hold true as a general rule, however, since the manuscripts of Sor María de San Alberto's plays include an abundance of specific stage directions and explanations written in the margins.

Another point of contact between commercial and convent theater is an overt self-consciousness that manifests itself through intertextuality and self-referentiality. Of course, convent theater derives its principle intertexts from biblical stories and hagiographies. However, Sor Violante's work indicates that these women were not only scholars of religious writings, but were also aware of the secular world around them. In her *D. Juan de Austria, y Ali Baxá*, the title characters meet with their armies at the Battle of Lepanto, and argue over whether or not the Virgin Mary will protect the Catholic troops against the Turkish soldiers. Although this *villancico* treats an overtly religious topic, that is, the power of a Catholic saint, the vehicles for Sor Violante's message of faith are characters based on historical figures. Works such as these reveal the author's

knowledge of and familiarity with more worldly subjects. Sor Maria do Ceo, in turn, makes use of secular models derived from classical mythology as a means of expressing religious teachings. In doing so, she creates hybrid characters and loci, as in her *auto*, *Rosal de Maria*, which features a shepherd who is both Adonis and Christ, and references an unseen paradise that is both Mount Olympus and Heaven.

In addition to this intertextuality, a sense of self-referentiality also abounds in convent theater as it does in the *comedia*. In point of fact, in Sor Maria's *Clavel, y Rosa*, the protagonist takes a moment to explain to the audience that the play is employing a metaphorical style, since "Cozas tan sagradas ay, / Que al tocarlas hade ser / Por sombras, ò por enigmas" (254). Rosa's acknowledgment of the role of the playwright indicates to the audience that she is aware of her own fictitious and allegorical nature. In Sor Violante's *Al Jordan*, the two voices in this *villancico* dialogue about a *comedia* in which, contrary to *comedias* such as *La vida es sueño*, "las apariencias / son todas realidades" (370). The characters go on to narrate their experience as spectators in a theater. They comment on the cousins in love, the author of the play, the costumes, the three acts, theatrical appearances, the music, and the action of the drama, and even shout "victor" (371) at the end of the performance to express their approval. In this excellent example of metatheater, the spectacle consists of the audience watching another group of spectators watch a play.

Oftentimes, this theatrical self-consciousness facilitates great comic moments, both in secular and conventual theater. This is certainly the case in Sor Marcela's work, where humorous and clearly self-referential moments must have served as a reminder to her audience of the severe requirements of their own discolored order. In regards to this

self-referentiality, it is imperative to consider the protagonist herself not only as “an abstraction, but also the shared experience of author, actors, and audience” (Smith 243). Sor Marcela often makes reference to this shared experience by mocking certain aspects of convent life, as when the characters lament their hunger, thus referencing the lack of food in the convent. The character of Alma facilitates an implicit discussion of convent life. The playwright even mocks herself, using her characters as vehicles for humorous self-deprecation. This self-referentiality indicates that, like *comedia* performances, convent productions did not incorporate the so-called fourth wall. Like secular actors, these nuns could speak directly to and even with the spectators of their plays, thus incorporating them into their production and making them an integral part of it.

Of course, *comedias* were not the only type of theater featured in the *corrales*. Early modern theater aficionados spent many hours in the corral, where they not only watched *comedias*, but also introductory *loas* as well as the entertaining *entremeses* that appeared between each of the three acts. Although literary critics pay less attention to these forms of theater than to the *comedia*, they also influenced and affected theater in the convent, as evidenced by shorter works such as those by Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto. In Cecilia’s *Fiestecilla para una profesión religiosa*, the bridegroom, dressed as a shepherd, explains that he is in love with a shepherdess, and divine Love promises to help him win her over. Love chides the shepherdess for her ingratitude and drastically changes her feelings towards the bridegroom. In María’s first *Fiesta del Nacimiento*, the playwright presents the audience with a verdant *locus amoenus* where shepherds and shepherdesses congregate to gather their flocks. A voice announces the birth of Christ, and they joyfully go to meet him and to offer him gifts.

The virgins Pobreza, Castidad, Obediencia, and Paciencia appear on stage in the second *Fiesta*, and each presents the Christ child with a gift. These offerings not only represent the nature of the characters, but also foreshadow the Christ child's life. María also penned a laudatory *loa* to be presented before the first *Fiesta*, as well as a *villancico* to serve as an *entremés* between the two. Obviously, the religious themes of these short works do not reflect the comic and often bawdy premises of traditional secular *entremeses*, but their concise forms clearly draw inspiration from the short, simple monologue or dialogue of the *loa* and the singing and dancing that often accompanies an *entremés*.⁹⁷

Notwithstanding the many elements that convent theater has in common with its secular counterpart, it stands out as a unique phenomenon that builds on previous theatrical tradition. Convent plays adapt and modify this secular tradition to fit within the framework of both the cloistered space and monastic life. For one, the main purpose of most of these works was to instruct and to edify, while the *comedia*, according to Lope de Vega's treatise on the subject, strove first and foremost to entertain the public. This is not to say, however, that nuns' plays did not amuse and divert their audience. On the

⁹⁷ Although Sor María and Sor Cecilia centered their theatre around the birth of Christ, Sor Francisca de Santa Teresa's *Entremés del estudiante y la sorda* is much more in keeping with the lighthearted fare to which *comedia* aficionados were accustomed. In this piece, a deaf woman named Inés and her husband, a rather dim-witted mayor, brag about their son Periquillo, who is clearly better suited to be a "burro" than a "maestro" (94-95). Periquillo's ability to speak an invented, bastardized form of Latin is the source of their comical pride. Pasante, a student from Salamanca, recognizes Periquillo's lack of mastery of the Latin language and tries to show him up, but proves to be just as foolish. At the end of the play, Pasante tries to prove his learning by proposing an extravagant and ridiculous cure for Inés's deafness. As Lisa Vollendorf points out, this play "seems better suited for public theaters than for convent audiences" (95). Its mocking and irreverent tone is certainly not typical of convent theatre, but does evidence the great amount of influence the secular theatrical tradition exercised on convent plays. What is more, although this *entremés* does not possess an overtly didactic nature, as do the works of other nuns, it does indirectly teach a valuable lesson. It touts the benefits of genuine education by ridiculing those who feign knowledge and intelligence without actual learning, such as the *alcalde*, his pseudo-learned son, and the student who comically overreaches the limits of his experience as he attempts to act as a doctor.

contrary, they employed self-referentiality, plays on words, singing, and dancing for this effect. The first half of the Horatian adage of *dulce et utile* was not lost on them. The nuns simply privileged learning over diversion, and therefore engaged the members of their audience in order to edify them. For instance, in addressing the *mujer varonil* trope in the *comedia*, Lope notes, “suele / el disfraz varonil agradar mucho” (282-83). Within the setting of the convent, of course, there were no male audience members to titillate with the presence of cross-dressing women. The nun actresses did cross-dress, as evidenced by Sor Maria’s *Clavel, y Rosa* and Sor Violante’s *villancicos*, but this was a necessity rather than a theatrical convention. This does not mean, however, that the nuns ignored the *mujer varonil* tradition. Instead, they appropriated it and made it their own. The protagonist of Sor Marcela’s spiritual colloquies provides the best example of this. Although Alma does not dress in masculine garb, she personifies “St. Teresa’s insistence that her Daughters demonstrate virility of character” (Arenal and Schlau 230). Alma does not require any sort of masculine dress to be *varonil*, since she adopts values traditionally perceived as masculine, such as “juicio, razón y discurso” (Covarrubias 195). Her *varonilidad* is interior rather than exterior.

This consideration of *varonilidad* in convent theater provides insight into the characterization of the female characters. Many early modern playwrights imbued their female characters with a great amount of power and authority. Laurencia in Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna*, Juana from Tirso de Molina’s *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, and Rosaura in Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* all display great strength and power as they shape the plot and drive the action of their respective plays. Unfortunately, this power is undermined or taken away by the traditional *comedia* ending. The typical

resolution, in which all the main characters are neatly paired off and engaged to marry, ensures that these *mujeres varoniles* return to their traditional, acceptable feminine role as subservient wives to their dominant husbands. In classic carnivalesque fashion, the playwrights allowed these female characters to temporarily infiltrate a sector of society that is customarily closed to them, only to force them to resume their previous position once proper order is restored.

This temporary inversion is even more conspicuous in the works of contemporaneous secular female playwrights. Both Ana Caro and María de Zayas penned drama that evidences a notable preoccupation with the plight of women in early modern Spanish society. Their *comedias*, *Valor, agravio y mujer* and *La traición en la amistad*, share several common traits with plays by male authors, such as featuring themes of romantic love and honor, as well as baroque topoi such as appearance and reality, they do so from a unique perspective that prefigures many of the concerns which later feminist writers and critics would address, such as female solidarity, the subjugation of women by patriarchal power structures, and violence perpetrated against women by men. Both women feature unique and strong female protagonists in their works, with Zayas producing Fenisa, a female Don Juan character, and Caro creating Leonor, the *mujer varonil* par excellence. Just like her male counterpart, Fenisa has several love interests, and leaves a similar path of destruction in her amorous wake. Quite unlike Don Juan, however, Fenisa claims to be motivated not by lust, but rather by love. Nevertheless, she is punished for her romantic exploits by being left without a partner at the end of the play, a plot element that some critics see as subversive. The other characters, however, are neatly paired off in keeping with *comedia* convention. Caro's protagonist is not merely a

cross-dressing, sword-wielding woman. In fact, she proves herself to be a better ‘man’ than the male characters in the play, since she bests the men at both swordplay and wooing women. Leonor is unusually and astoundingly *varonil*. What is more, the playwright even pokes fun at early modern misogyny, using a *criado*, Ribete, as a mouthpiece. He resentfully complains, “aun quieren poetizar / las mujeres, y se atreven / a hacer comedias ya” (1170-72). Despite these feminist elements, her ending does not distinguish itself from traditional secular theater of the time period.

McKendrick points out that plays such as these are “liberal in important respects, but ultimately conservative” (105). Convent theater distinguishes itself from secular works in significant ways. Sor Maria’s characterization of the Virgin Mary in works such as *Clavel, y Rosa*, for instance, portrays a strong, powerful, commanding woman that demands the respect of her male counterparts. In fact, the playwright presents her protagonist as a savior in her own right, enticing those who have gone astray to return to Christ. As Valerie Hegstrom explains, “the Virgin, herself, becomes the figure who makes possible man’s and woman’s redemption” (213). Fascinatingly, she is never forced to relinquish this position of power and influence. In this way, nun playwrights reflected their own relative freedom from patriarchal society and celebrated their position of importance and influence as both spiritual mothers and brides of Christ.

The first in Sor Marcela’s series of colloquies, *La muerte del apetito*, provides yet another example of the uniqueness of convent theater. *Comedias* usually feature swordplay and altercations, and even make mention of more violent spectacles, such as the bullfight scene in Lope de Vega’s *El caballero de Olmedo*. Wife murder plays, such as Calderón de la Barca’s *El médico de su honra* and Lope de Vega’s *El castigo sin*

venganza, shockingly feature brutal and bloody murders. Violence itself, however, did not occur onstage in the *corrales*. Perhaps due to the watchful eye of those moralists for whom the *comedia* was already suspect, these scenes of aggression and bloodshed were not actually acted out, but rather mentioned after the fact or watched by the characters onstage while they occur in an unseen offstage locus. Sor Marcela, however, does not hesitate to stage violence. In fact, in her first colloquy, Desnudez strangles Apetito twice, and towards the end of the play Alma binds him and helps Desnudez to restrain him so that Mortificación can run the villain through with a sharp sword. Not only did theater in the convent allow cloistered nuns experiences that would not have been possible *extramuros*, such as writing, acting in, and directing plays, but the restrictive confines of the convent could also be liberating in other ways, as well, permitting these nun playwrights artistic expression that even their secular counterparts did not enjoy. Sor Violante's *villancicos* best exemplify this enhanced artistic expression, as evidenced by the unique and exceptional roles played by nuns, which ranged from shepherdesses and gypsies to nymphs and even God himself. No other early modern plays allowed for women to play such surprising roles.

The unique nature of these plays is a direct result of the convent space in which the nuns wrote and performed them. By considering both place and practice as a space that “embodies and implies particular social relations” (Lefebvre 83), we discover in these dramatic works a strong understanding of early modern gender norms as well as an underlying resistance to those norms. As Daphne Spain notes, “Thinking about gendered spaces . . . includes exploring gender relations in concrete situations that have spatial attributes” (26). Female religious chose and employed “spatial practices” and “everyday

tactics” (Certeau 115), such as dramatic presentation and representation, in order to undermine traditional gender expectations and relations. The walls of the convent were meant to protect and control women, but this enclosure had unexpected effects. The cloister also liberated nuns by allowing them rare opportunities for self-expression and exploration. The convent may have served as “a social symbol of sacrificial virginity” (Lavrín 87), but it also created a “self-ruled society of women” (352) in which early modern Iberian nuns could more freely learn, explore, write, act, and even defy societal expectations and controls.

As I have shown here, the convents in Spain and Portugal enjoyed a rich theatrical tradition that ran parallel to the one that occurred in *corrales*, plazas, and courtyards. Despite the cloistered state of the women who wrote, directed, and acted in these plays, the influence of secular theater surfaces in their *autos*, *coloquios*, *loas*, *villancicos*, and *entremeses*. Nun playwrights, however, were not content with mere imitation. Instead, they adopted and adapted these influences, discarding what did not suit their purpose and modifying certain elements in order to further their cause. For example, they may utilize the form but change the message. Comedy, for instance, is not absent, but usually takes a back seat to didacticism. Social elements such as love and honor are present, but serve as vehicles for the promotion of righteous living. For instance, the nun playwrights appropriate the *mujer varonil* trope as a prescriptive characterization rather than a theatrical convention. By tailoring popular theatrical genres in this way, these creative women were able to utilize performance as both a diversion and an educational tool. Their works are simultaneously spiritual, theatrical, and didactic, meant to uplift, instruct, and edify. The fact that they did not employ certain elements of public theater does not

mean that they were unaware of them, but rather that they did not fit within the scope of their project or serve their intent. In short, these women created a unique theatrical tradition all their own.

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