

Virgins to the Rescue: Male Abdication and Female Empowerment in  
Angela de Azevedo

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The misogynist moralist writings and financial crises of Early Modern Europe certainly contributed to the depiction of Spanish women as commodities of exchange whose alleged promiscuous appetites and marital aspirations had to be controlled by men. These attitudes help explain why, in the worlds of Angela de Azevedo, men continually and casually intervene in women's lives even in the few restricted spaces seemingly beyond men's control. In *La margarita del Tajo que dio nombre a Santarén*, not only do we see men who have little respect for religious vows, we also witness a male god seemingly more interested in preserving a woman's virginity than her life. In *Dicha y desdicha del juego y devoción de la Virgen*, God the Father is virtually absent, leaving the title character to defend innocent virgins and save heretical men. Taken together, the dramas reveal a general loss of faith in the ability of men and male deities to protect bodies and souls. As male authority figures abdicate this traditional responsibility, Azevedo borrows from the *galán de monjas* and hagiographic traditions as well as from popular Marian legends and visual representations to develop steadfastly pious and boldly determined female characters ready to fill the void.

Natalie Zemon Davis, in her discussion of the "unruly woman," reminds us that the prevailing ideology in Early Modern Europe attributed men's faults to culture and upbringing, thereby deeming them correctable, whereas female defects purportedly flowed from their physiology and were thus permanent. She further shows how the declining status of women in much of Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries aligned with efforts of nation states to become more dominant forces in the lives of their citizens. She sees men's attempts to subjugate women as parallel to the state's efforts to subjugate its subjects to its social and geopolitical goals (147-51). Despite her numerous examples of female subordination, she nonetheless asserts that the various depictions of the "unruly woman" in art and literature also engendered real life examples of female self-actualization and agency (172-76, 183). Azevedo's Irene, like theoretically any nun, could certainly be classified as an "unruly woman"

since her religious vocation obviates the need for any man to control her movements in an effort to deny her the opportunity for sexual activity. Such a woman, exercising more autonomy in social relations than her secular sisters, poses an especially vexing threat to patriarchal societies that claim to honor female chastity while seeking to restrain those who live by it (Scott Soufas 93).

Citing events more specific to Azevedo's time, Elizabeth Lehfeltdt sees military defeats, trade imbalances, and epidemic disease as provoking a moral vacuum that contributes to a generalized crisis of masculinity on the Iberian Peninsula. These circumstances prompted a search for traditional values (virtue, moderation, military prowess, protection of female sexuality) that many thinkers of the day found lacking among Spain's men. The perceived obligation to defend women contributed to the belief they must be enclosed and kept out of the public eye in order to ensure their chastity (464-68), a notion clearly reflected in Sor Irene's convent as depicted in *La Margarita del Tajo*.

#### *La Margarita del Tajo*<sup>1</sup>

Azevedo combines the *galán de monjas* motif with the hagiographic tale of Irene who is not only held responsible for igniting desire in the already married Britaldo and in her spiritual supervisor, Remigio, but is subsequently sent by God's angel to calm their passions. Britaldo attempts to serenade Irene outside her convent window, but after a thrashing at the hands of the angel, Britaldo meets with her and, upon extorting a vow that she will remain a virgin, renounces his desire. But when she rejects Remigio, her confessor seeks revenge by having her drink a potion that makes her appear pregnant, prompting her expulsion from the convent. Convinced she has broken her vow, Britaldo has his servant, Banán, kill her. Seeing her sanctified body in the parted waters of the Tagus (Tajo), Britaldo and Remigio are inspired to leave on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land while Rosimunda (Britaldo's wife) will await her husband's return in the same convent that failed to protect Irene.

Irene's body functions as a site where the conflicting desires and ambitions of various players, including those of the nun herself, are expressed. Irene, seeking martyrdom, is eager to escape corporeal and terrestrial constraints while the men see or use her body as an instrument of sexual arousal, a visible sign of violated promises to Britaldo and broken

vows to God, and ultimately a catalyst of confession and spiritual inspiration. Aroused by Irene's body, Britaldo and Remigio try to deflect blame, claiming they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. They want to resist, but the God of Love, they assert, is too strong. This celestial power we may interpret as a symbol of the myriad transformations spurred by the previously mentioned economic insecurity and accompanying moral instability that men cannot navigate.

Although set in seventh-century Portugal, the world evoked by Azevedo strongly resembles her own, one no longer ostensibly governed by immutable divine values, where the prestige of and respect for rank and position are eroded by forces no man can escape or contain. Pushed by this unseen and unforeseeable power, Remigio and Britaldo attempt to regain control over something or someone as a means of compensating for their lost authority. Thus they claim to assault Irene despite themselves. While Irene is violated by earthly forces, she gives consent to and cooperates with God's divine will that she be a martyr. Azevedo, then, portrays her as the only one striving for a heavenly life and working *with* a supernatural power that not only supersedes and defeats all others, but also rewards Irene with the prize she seeks—martyrdom.

The irresistible entity driving the men, identified as the blind God of Love, works through Irene's body and uses her physical attributes to attract them. In a conversation with Irene, God's angel explains:

...el ciego amor te persigue,  
y hace de tus ojos flechas  
para que a Britaldo tire. (1379-81)<sup>2</sup>

This description of events seems to exculpate both Britaldo and Irene. Since Love is using the latter's body to arouse the former, they are merely pawns in Love's game. But then, the angel strongly suggests Irene is at fault by commanding her to somehow redirect Britaldo's advances:

Procura a Britaldo hablar,  
y su exceso reprehensible  
desengaña, porque en esto  
sus mejorías consisten. (1422-25)

Here, the angel invokes carnal desire as a sickness that has infected Britaldo and that Irene must cure. As one of several ways God displays his attachment to the traditions and mores of the physical world in this play,

the angel shows himself mindful of the reputations of single ladies who visit men, explaining it will not be a problem for Irene:

...que no se prohíbe  
a cualquiera religiosa  
que los enfermos visite  
en virtud de caridad. (1429-32)

In a soliloquy immediately following the conversation with the angel, it is clear Irene understands and accepts the implied divine judgment against her and her physical attractiveness:

...¿Tú ocasión diste  
a pasiones amorosas?  
¿A esto has llegado? ¿Es posible?  
¡Tu hermosura ha sido causa  
tu belleza ha sido origen  
de inquietudes tan traviesas, (1447-52)

Tellingly, throughout most of the play, Irene is the only one to accept any responsibility for her actions, intentional or otherwise. But in Britaldo, Maria João Dodman explains, we see the effects of the aforementioned masculinity crisis. At first, he is the perfect example of traditional aristocratic values. But Dodman extrapolates that the riches of the Iberian empire, thought to have effeminized and weakened men, take their toll on Britaldo. His early defeat at the hands of the angel defending Irene, the fact that no woman really pleases him, and his failure to consummate his marriage to Rosimunda all contribute to the image of a less than ideal male. Britaldo shows no regard for women, rank, or religious vows, responding only with increasingly outrageous and aggressive action as the play progresses (Dodman 403-06, 409-12). For example, Britaldo maintains he is being driven beyond the point of self-recognition and invokes Love as the oppressive supernatural force pushing him there:

de amor y de celos rabio,  
y en el empeño que sigo  
más me pierdo, más me abraso (1877-79)  
mas mi voluntad no es mía,  
que la tiene cautivada  
el ciego amor (que por eso  
le llaman el dios tirano, (1964-67)

At one point, Rosimunda calls on her father-in-law, Castinaldo, to intervene. The old man proves to be one of the few sympathetic male characters of the play, saying he understands his son's passion and, adopting a quasi-anthropological approach, claims humans cannot always control their own will (1952-55). Yet Castinaldo reminds his son that what separates man from animals is his ability to use reason to override his feelings (1924-47) and that he still holds Britaldo responsible for failing to control his desires:

...Sólo extraño  
Que no queráis reprimirlos,  
Que no queráis refrenarlos, (1955-57)

Castinaldo even turns poetic, comparing his son's love to a ship on a stormy sea and human reason to the sun that can pierce the clouds obscuring his better judgment (1976-2007). But as Christopher Gascón observes, in Azevedo's world, men inevitably fall short in their mediation efforts and Castinaldo is no different ("Female and Male" 125, 135). Britaldo is adamant that he has tried and failed to stifle his passion and that any further efforts will result in his demise (2009-13). Giving himself over to love and the mission to win Irene's heart, he even threatens his wife and family:

Morid vos, y mueran todos,  
que yo en vivo fuego abrasado  
diré a voces del trofeo (2020-22)  
viva Irene a quien consagro  
mi afecto... (2025-26)

Whether aware of it or not, Britaldo is obviously not thinking straight when he goes so far as to instruct his servant to go to Remigio, Irene's confessor, so that the latter may present Britaldo's affections to Irene in a dignified manner (2358-63). When the servant predicts Remigio's refusal, Britaldo remains undeterred and states he will simply force Remigio to bend to his wishes (2364-68). His scheme never gets off the ground, but the fact he is willing to ask Irene's spiritual advisor to essentially be her pimp shows how far afield he has strayed and how he seeks to emphasize her corporeal traits as a means of tethering her in the material realm. Indeed, the men's unsuccessful attempts to court her translate as a double failure: not only does Irene spurn sexual activity, but in doing so, denies them any

chance to tie her down with the mundane, earthly, motherly responsibilities of raising a child (DiPuccio 390).

Irene will not be constrained by such bodily and terrestrial limits. Obeying the angel, she uses her powers of persuasion and reasonable discourse to dissuade Britaldo from his plan. Britaldo declares his passion and asks she do the same, but instead, Irene gives him a lesson on the difference between “querer bien” and “querer mucho”:

No queréis bien, queréis mucho,  
vuestra queja así se engaña;  
querer mucho y querer bien,  
son dos cosas muy contrarias.  
Querer bien es querer sólo  
lo que a la razón agrada;  
querer mucho es querer más  
de lo que la razón manda. (2556-63)

True love is thus ruled by reason and logic, subduing the urge to enter the sexual realm. Irene proposes to Britaldo an “afecto liso y puro” (2610), in an attempt to guide him to a more ethereal sphere and proffering a more platonic, or at least Neoplatonic relationship: “Amemos a lo divino / come se quieren las almas” (2612-13). Her proposal, accentuating the spiritual over the material, points to Irene’s continued drift away from the corporeal toward a more celestial plane and to her desire for a like existence. Nonetheless, she is not unaware of the effectiveness of a more down-to-earth strategy and so warns Britaldo that God, like any human jealous lover, will protect his bride and that he commits a great wrong against the Almighty and against his own wife if he continues (2644-54). In this way, Azevedo’s angel resembles the Almighty as portrayed in a number of hagiographic and secular dramas in that He is wary and will defend against those who try to attract what He sees as His bride (DiPuccio 384).

Yet the problem may be with God’s questionable priorities, for while He will repel suitors, He refuses to preserve life. As Teresa Scott Soufas points out, God does not follow Irene’s prescription of a love “a lo divino,” preferring to indulge His rage and possessiveness by engaging in physical battle with His terrestrial rival, thus beginning a series of misread circumstances that result in Irene’s death (97), which God presumably has the ability to prevent. His willingness to thwart Britaldo’s attempt to compromise what He sees as Irene’s sexual purity but refusal to preserve

her life paints a portrait of a God who makes female corporeal virginity a condition for martyred celestial existence. Like men of the finite world, the Almighty judges spiritual worth by purely physical means.

Nonetheless, in this episode, Irene initially proves to be a skilled mediator between heaven and earth. She somehow assuages Britaldo's sexual urges, and he asks forgiveness. But in perhaps the most arrogant act of the play, he extracts a promise from her "Que ninguno otro lograra / lo que yo no puedo..." (2717-18). It is, to say the least, an audaciously presumptuous action by a man who wishes to dispense with the mediator role altogether in that he believes he may displace not only other men, but God himself, as if he owned Irene's body and actions. Britaldo puts himself on the same level as the Almighty since he also prioritizes Irene's virginity over her life. In a world where women find some measure of freedom only by committing body and soul to a divine male figure, Britaldo seems determined to violate even that last refuge to regain control over Irene.

Remigio's advances only reinforce the notion of Irene's body as a battleground between male lust and the female vows of celibacy that are supposed to put women beyond male control. As the priest charged with Irene's spiritual guidance and growth, he is a more insidious suitor—due to his abuse of power as well as to his deceit (DiPuccio 393)—who also claims to be a helpless captive of love as he finds himself falling for Irene (2157). In an apostrophe to the nun, he uses familiar imagery to describe his feelings:

Contagio es sin duda amor,  
que también se comunica,  
a mi corazón se aplica  
de Britaldo este rigor;  
Ya somos del ciego dios,  
Irene, dos los heridos  
y pues están dos perdidos, (2160-66)

While the metaphor is not new, we should not overlook how he tries to eschew responsibility for his feelings, claiming to have contracted the malady of love from Britaldo. Remigio's soliloquy at the beginning of act III reveals his inner strife (2744-2899). He adds, this time, that Love is not only blind but insane (2788) and puts forth several reasons it should release him from its grip:

¿No bastaban mis años, (2836)

¿No bastaba mi vida (2840)  
 ¿No bastó mi opinion (2844)  
 ¿No bastaban maestro  
 de Irene? (2848-49)  
 ¿No bastó su virtud [la de Irene] (2852)

Azevedo draws Remigio as the most thoughtful character of the play, and as such he clearly considers what he is risking, claims to have hidden his passion for some time (3902-17), but finally resigns himself to the whims of Love as king (2872). After Irene spurns his declaration, Remigio seems no more ready than Britaldo to accept responsibility for his own actions. In the soliloquy subsequent to Irene's refusal (3056-3155), he imagines himself as Love's ally seeking vengeance on Irene, leading him to prepare the potion that creates her simulated pregnancy (3136-45). But by the end of his tirade, Remigio's motives become clearer and more selfish:

...Bien me vengo  
 pues de Irene en la opinión;  
 acabe su estimación  
 con la industria que prevengo. (3146-49)

Near the end of the play, Remigio publicly confesses he concocted the potion and spread the rumor that she has broken her vow (3926-49). Expelled from the convent for her apparent sin,<sup>3</sup> Irene's body is forcibly transformed into a living scarlet letter that she cannot simply take off at the end of the day. She must remain a physical reminder of an ostensibly violated promise that leads to her death.

It is a death that cannot take Irene completely by surprise. She tells Remigio early on of her wish to become a martyr (868-903), yet seems uncertain as to how much blame she carries for the series of events that will bestow that title on her. Asking Rosimunda's forgiveness for attracting her husband, Irene says:

Aunque, Rosimunda bella,  
 no me conozca culpada  
 viéndoos contra mí enojada  
 apruebo vuestra querella;  
 y sin ser la causa de ella (1580-84)  
 .....  
 perdón os pido rendida (1587)

But then a few lines later:



No niego que a las pasiones  
de Britaldo causas di; (1590-91)

However much responsibility she accepts, Azevedo makes it clear that Irene understands and consents to her martyrdom. God's angel appears to her in a dream and informs her Britaldo has ordered her death but does not reveal who will execute the order. He describes the manner and aftermath of her murder in great detail (3669-3712) although the reason is murky, as the divine messenger says only that "El cielo por ti Milagros / infinitos ha de hacer" (3713-14). Her joyous reaction, "¡Yo mártir, mi Dios, yo mártir! / ¡A Irene tanta merced!" (3687-88), underlines her voluntary cooperation with the Almighty and her approval of having her corpse treated in the manner the angel foresees. The nun's exclamation at the approach of her assassin seems to indicate she agrees even with divine opinion that prioritizes virginity over life:

Mi honor, señor, defendido  
aunque se pierda la vida,  
que no hay vida como él es. (3756-58)

All happens as the angel predicts and the remaining characters are witness to the miracle at the conclusion of the drama. The waters of the Tagus part, revealing Irene's body—unmolested except for her fatal wound—on top of a wonderfully adorned coffin and a host of angels singing her praises (4074-4136).<sup>4</sup>

Despite this dazzling dénouement that inspires the remaining characters to devote their lives to God, it is a puzzling conclusion to say the least. Remigio manipulates Irene's body as a means to his own revenge while Britaldo ends her corporeal existence simply because he thought another man had taken possession of it—as if he had the right to her body in the first place. Through her martyrdom, her body is used once again—this time to convey the message of her saintly life that, according to the men at the end of the play, inspires their rather suspect repentance (DiPuccio 393). Yet, their curious penance is for Britaldo to leave a spouse and Remigio to abandon a ministry as they vow to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Banán promises to accompany them. Rosimunda decides to wait for her husband's return in the same convent that could not shield Irene, suggesting a similar course of events may repeat itself. Indeed, as Denise DiPuccio notes, the conclusion implies not only a kind of female interchangeability but also a regeneration or extension of male control over

women's bodies and movement as Irene ascends to a heavenly realm ostensibly under the reign of God the father while Rosimunda shifts from the somewhat restrictive domestic sphere to a convent where, because she remains a married woman presumably still under the control of her husband, she will not enjoy even the modicum of freedom afforded to traditional nuns (389).<sup>5</sup>

The only characters who escape regret and get what they want in the end are Irene and God. Early on she wishes for the celestial, ineffable, transcendent existence of being God's servant that only martyrdom can bring and, through the angel, she knows she will be granted her wish. We can therefore see the men's efforts at seduction as an attempt to keep her grounded, concrete, terrestrial, as it were. Their sexual advances try to entice Irene into an intensely *human* act, and the false pregnancy is interpreted as evidence that she not only violated her vows but that she is unambiguously attached to this world. As Scott Soufas observes, her rejection of the men's advances means nearly all male figures in the play, Remigio, Britaldo, and Banán—all "with the sanction of God himself"—contribute to Irene's earthly demise (103). Yet she finds a way to break the men's hold on her by agreeing to cooperate with the Almighty. It is therefore difficult to agree completely with Teresa Ferrer Valls's assertion that the solution to the problems faced by Azevedo's female characters "es siempre externa a ellos" (240). The realization of Irene's martyrdom is more the result of her understanding and consent, her collaboration with God, than that of any divine, unilateral decree. Azevedo may believe that men cannot be trusted to respect women's spaces and bodies, but she apparently has faith God will reward those who accede to his will while ultimately frustrating, if not punishing, men who seek to thwart the divine covenants between Him and His female creations.

#### *Dicha y desdicha*

The substitution of money for nobility and the practice of exploiting female bodies as objects of exchange make virtuous male role models just as rare in *Dicha y desdicha del juego y devoción de la Virgen* as in *La Margarita del Tajo*. Reflecting the dire economic situation many Spaniards of Azevedo's era experience because of national bankruptcies, currency emergencies, and war (Scott Soufas 70), Felisardo is a young man so impoverished by these socio-economic realities and his defunct father's gambling that he has no

dowry for his sister, María, and thus little hope of securing a match for her or assuring his own preferred union with Nuño's daughter, Violante. He only makes things worse by gambling away his sister's virginity to the rich Fadrique—Nuño's favored suitor for his daughter's hand—who is repelled by the Virgin Mary from raping María as she sleeps. In a desperate bargain with the Devil, the demon gets Felisardo to repudiate God and Christianity, but not the Virgin. As the Devil flies him toward Hell, Mary mounts an aerial counterattack, saving Felisardo at the last second. After hearing the story of these miraculous events, Nuño relents and allows the marriages the young people desire as a fulfillment of divine will.

It is my contention that Azevedo's rather dynamic Virgin offers not only a physically vigorous female role model, but also portends a more active part for Mary in the psychological and political realms while pushing theologically accepted boundaries. Preserving the customary maternal qualities of the Virgin, Azevedo, perhaps inspired by quasi-pugilist images of Mary, proffers an empowered Virgin who brooks little resistance against her celestial resolve.

Mary's high-flying heroics, combined with her more traditionally compassionate nature, underline the kind of multifaceted female deity necessary to the maturation process of men who seemingly refuse to grow up. Christopher Gascón borrows from Lacanian theory, and Julia Kristeva's comments thereon, to emphasize the need for a maternal figure to facilitate Felisardo's passage from the Lacanian Imaginary stage—characterized by an infant's realization that psychic desires can never be fully satisfied—to the Symbolic realm where subjects learn to compromise their desires through language and acceptance of laws, limits, institutions and rituals to better integrate themselves into adult society (129). Gascón argues persuasively that Felisardo realizes he cannot achieve his desire of a satisfactory dowry for his sister María or his marriage to Violante by beseeching God the Father. The young man already feels wounded and abandoned by his deceased biological father, who gambled away the family's assets, and believes he has little chance of receiving mercy from a stern God whose laws he breaks by betting his sister's virginity and subsequently renouncing Christianity. Citing Kristeva's work, Gascón shows the essential role the Virgin plays as a mother whose mercy and forgiving nature is instrumental in mediating Felisardo's desires and reconciling him with God the Father (130-33, 135-36, 141).

While it is true Felisardo's only way to the Symbolic realm is through the Virgin's intervention, he nevertheless makes an attempt to leave the Imaginary by dealing with a male authority figure after losing to Fadrique. Unable to face God the Father, Felisardo does not hesitate to invoke the Devil. An act of desperation, to be sure but it still shows Felisardo's willingness to seek succor from a male figure, one he knows may initially grant his wishes, but whose whole *raison d'être* is to deny humans' desire for salvation, thus casting the Devil as the paternal symbol of prohibition *par excellence*. After his loss to Fadrique, Felisardo becomes aware that instant gratification—typically demanded by infants—is impossible. Instead, in his bargaining with the demon, he seeks a contract with rules and obligations he must fulfill in order to attain his prize. Even after refusing the Devil's final condition that he renounces his devotion to the Virgin, Felisardo seems to understand and accept the consequences:

DEM. No ves que estás perdido;  
di, ¿por qué no te aprovechas?  
FEL. Piérdase todo; a la Virgen  
el respeto no se pierda. (2862-65)

Yet as soon as the Devil attempts to fly him to Hell, it becomes clear Felisardo either reneges on his word to accept—or did not fully appreciate—the consequences of his actions. His quick return to the Imaginary order becomes evident as he immediately implores the Virgin to rescue him, much like a child calls out for his mother when unable to navigate an obstacle or to satisfy a need on his own. Disappointed or deceived by yet another male authority figure, Felisardo basically exhausts all adult avenues of solving his problem, becomes overwhelmed, and resorts to the only solution left him—crying out for mommy. Felisardo's crimes and subsequent desperation are emblematic of the play's male figures whose malevolent character, uncaring attitude, or impotent nature contrast with Mary's merciful and redemptive power. Whether in the earthly, celestial, or infernal realm, men bring only vice and damnation.

For Mirzam Pérez, Azevedo uses the male figures as foils to highlight a virtuous and authoritative Virgin in an effort to reinforce monarchical and, specifically, the queen's power.<sup>6</sup> In service to and enjoying the favor of Queen Isabel de Borbón, wife of Philip IV, from 1621 until the queen's death in 1644, the playwright had a privileged position from which to observe the potentate and court activities (65). Pérez believes Azevedo

draws a parallel between the Queen of Heaven and the Queen of Spain in an effort to reinforce Isabel's military initiatives and her legitimacy as regent (67, 70). Citing the queen's support for court theater, her devotion to the Virgin, and her 1642-44 regency, Pérez contends Azevedo finds royal inspiration to portray Mary as not merely a spiritual entity, but also a flesh and blood woman of action who enjoys a strong cult following among the people (if not the Catholic Church, Gascón 126) and who echoes the woman invoked in the Book of Revelation—who crushes evil in the form of serpents or dragons<sup>7</sup>—by emasculating the Devil who must recognize his own impotence before her might (Pérez 73-77).

Pérez's evidence that Azevedo's Virgin is designed to reinforce Spain's Catholic monarchy is persuasive, yet circumstantial. It is nevertheless clear the playwright's depiction of the Virgin as a potent warrior against evil is in step with popular Marian art of the time (75). These images and the malevolence or absence of Azevedo's male figures contribute to a theological stance that eschews or defies some doctrinal Catholic teachings of the era.

The Virgin's rebuke of the Devil when he attempts to whisk Felisardo to Hell is certainly in step with Catholic teaching that no sinner is beyond God's mercy as long as he lives (2909-14). And although at no time does she claim to displace God the Father's "piedad inmensa" (2919), she is not shy in describing what she adds to divine justice:

Y más con mi patrocinio,  
que tiene con Dios tal fuerza,  
que como le tenga el nombre  
de su parte, no experimenta  
de Dios el menor castigo;  
y porque, alevoso, veas  
la estimación que Dios hace  
de mi nombre, de la pena  
y culpa que cometió  
éste mi devoto, ordena  
que quede absuelto,... (2920-30)

This is a Virgin who feels the need to flaunt the sway she holds with the Almighty in front of the demon. She declares Felisardo will not be punished and is forgiven his sins—a power the Catholic Church teaches belongs to God alone but one Azevedo's Mary is apparently empowered to

announce in the absence of any apparent consultation with Him. Moreover, she contends these gifts are granted to the penitent not because he is especially deserving, but rather to show the Devil how much the Almighty favors her. Victory is insufficient. She has to rub his nose in it.

As the Virgin's title "Theotokos" (Mother of God) was declared at the Council of Ephesus in 431 (Warner 105), her role as merciful maternal intercessor was well developed by Azevedo's era (Hall 17-16). But her rank as Queen of Heaven, not officially declared by the Church until 1954 (Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam* 47), is referred to several times throughout the play. Fadrique even promotes her to "emperatriz celeste" (3197) while Felisardo calls her "alta Emperatriz:" (2957), "poderosa Reina" (2961) and, in his moment of desperation, "Reina insigne de los orbes / a cuya gracia suprema / ...todo el mundo se confiesa" (2896-97, 2899). Blending these two roles, the Virgin protects María, as she sleeps, from Fadrique's intended sexual assault. Like a mother, she shames him for contemplating an attack on an innocent and forsaking his vow, and as a potentate might warn a subordinate, dissuades him with the threat of a robust "difensión" of María (3182-3245).

The vigor of this defense—just a verbal warning to Fadrique—in Felisardo's case, takes the form of midair combat that draws on a rich visual cache of the Virgin depicted as ready to do battle with demonic figures to protect the helpless. Various artists created the *Madonna del Soccorso* images which invariably show her in the scene itself or arriving by aerial apparition, wielding a rather large stick, ready to strike a naked, smaller, dark, winged creature—sporting a tail and sometimes armed with some kind of baton or small pitchfork—in order to repel its apparent assault on little children (see figures 1-4).

Marina Warner reminds us that the rise in popularity of images of "the Virgin in Triumph" dates back at least to the Iconoclast heresy and rise of the papal state in the seven and eight hundreds (108-09). The development of her depiction as pugilist and warrior can be traced at least to the legend of Theophilus who sells his soul to the Devil and is saved when the Virgin wrestles the demon to regain the deed to Theophilus's soul. The portal of the twelfth-century church at Souillac, France, marks the first time an action of the Virgin, other than the Incarnation, appears "in monumental art." Visual renditions of the story reappear in diverse media during succeeding centuries. For example, the northern portal of Notre Dame de

Paris displays a Virgin extracting the deed from the Devil at the point of her sword (Warner 323-24, see figure 5). From these images, it is not difficult to imagine the Virgin as combatant. The popular belief she comes to the aid of belligerents ostensibly fighting on God's side is widespread in Spain's kingdoms in Azevedo's day. In images depicting battles during and after the Reconquest, she is seen at times as taking "an active part in defeating the enemy" (Hall 10). In the early decades of Spain's invasion of the Americas, hailed by many for her aid in conquering and converting indigenous populations, the Virgin is even portrayed in one drawing from the c. 1615 *Nueva coronica y buen gobierno* as conjuring a sandstorm to defeat an Incan army (Guamán Poma de Ayala 293). Even if Azevedo did not have occasion to see all or any of these visual representations, *Dicha y desdicha* is certainly imbued with the ideas of the formidable, independent Virgin it evokes. The playwright of course advocates nothing akin to twenty-first century movements to have Mary's status elevated to "Co-Redemptrix" (Hall 9-10). She nonetheless creates a world where God the Father's seeming indifference to his human creations mirrors Reformist ideas of a male deity whose mercy and salvific action cannot be influenced by human behavior (Bouman 806, Wriedt 92). Moreover, Azevedo's Virgin says she proceeds in concert with God, but her actions echo myriad legends and miracle stories where Mary undoubtedly displays abilities usually reserved to God or Christ (Warner 323). In a world of unwilling or unable male figures, Azevedo seems untroubled by casting a bold female supernatural being to step forward.

The men's paralysis is created in large part by their blithe acceptance of the status quo and belief they can (or should) do little or nothing to change it. The reader/spectator can at first feel some sympathy for Felisardo, as his unfortunate situation is not entirely of his own making. We see that his father's actions and the anguish they caused his mother are so painful, he cannot even finish his sentences as he recounts his woes to his servant Sombrero (296-307). But this pity soon vanishes. As Gascón observes, when Felisardo rejects Sombrero's suggestion that might improve his master's situation—going to America to seek riches (355-406)—we are left with the impression Felisardo has already reached the conclusion that any action on his part would be fruitless. He expresses faith in the Virgin (340-47), but seemingly lacks the initiative to do for himself.<sup>8</sup>

It is at best ironic and at worst evil that when Felisardo—a man so obsessed with his sister’s virginity that he battles oneiric intruders to defend it—does take the initiative; he presumes to use María’s body as collateral in some high-stakes game. He may be in line with the prevailing male mindset of the day in assuming quasi ownership of his sister’s body, but such an ideology is intended to limit a woman’s sexual opportunities—thus protecting the family’s (read men’s) honor—until such time as the man can arrange a suitable marriage.<sup>9</sup> To say Felisardo’s actions are beyond the pale, in that with one act he destroys his family’s honor, endangers his sister’s chances of marriage (thus closing off one of the few avenues to financial security for women), and enables the violation of her body, is certainly to understate the case. Azevedo clearly indicts men’s inconsistent endorsement of virginity: they admire sexual purity in divine, untouchable beings, but still want it available to them in negotiations in the terrestrial realm.

Despite the playwright’s condemnation of this double standard of virginity, she nonetheless upholds traditional Catholic teaching that no sinner is beyond divine help while alive (2911-14), even if God the Father is nowhere to be found. In the aforementioned scene where the Devil attempts to whisk Felisardo to the Underworld, Mary ascends, intercepts the Devil and his captive, battles the demon, and safely returns Felisardo to the stage in a visually stunning theatrical feat that must have necessitated the most complex of *tramoya* acrobatics.<sup>10</sup> This airborne spectacle reflects the popular Marian image of maternal intercessor as well as Azevedo’s intent to portray the Virgin as a resolute warrior. That a man responsible for his own dire predicament renounces the institutional church and God the Father while beseeching a female deity as the only means of succor demonstrates to what degree all characters lose faith in the ability of men—divine or human—to rectify the moral violations they commit.

Nuño, Violante’s father, does nothing to restore this faith. The quintessential father of his monetarily obsessed era, he sees his daughter as little more than a business opportunity. Azevedo does not, however, draw him as totally blind to his Violante’s preference for Felisardo, thus depicting him as even more sinister than a father simply unaware of his daughter’s marital wishes. Nuño is cognizant of Violante’s desires, saying he can sense them even though she says nothing; he simply gives them no weight (De Armas 150-52), believing his will as father overrides hers and that the



opportunity to grow his fortune and his fear of negative public opinion, were he to marry her to a poor man, supersede Felisardo's noble birth and character (2057-96).

Yet, as a sign of his rather flexible moral principles, "...la fortuna / (que tiene sus altibajos) / hace y deshace noblezas" (2153-55), Nuño's interrogation of the young man implies that had Felisardo had sex or concluded an engagement with his daughter, he might relent (2130-39). Nuño's words reflect the view that a woman's primary value, her virginity, remains in men's hands. He clearly fears that if Violante had engaged in intercourse with Felisardo, the father would have little left to offer Fadrique to entice him to marry her. If such were the case, Nuño would feel he has nothing left to lose by granting Felisardo's request.

As it may be difficult to imagine a more insensitive Nuño, Azevedo removes that burden from the reader/spectator in a subsequent scene where he tells Violante of Felisardo's initial good fortune when beginning to gamble with Fadrique then of the subsequent loss not only of all his winnings but of María as well (2606-27). In what may be Azevedo's attempt to make Nuño "one of the most horrible father figures in *comedia* history" (Pérez 72), he sees no need to console his daughter and exclaims "¡no hay más extraña locura!" (2629).

We could consider Nuño less of a character than a stand in for the capitalistic culture taking hold of Spanish society that offers no more apology for its existence than the wind would for blowing or the sun for shining. Nuño simply accepts the status quo, neither showing remorse for his actions nor longing for a better time when virtue and honor were the true marks of nobility. Yet Azevedo does not create him as an indifferent force of nature but rather as a thinking (if thoughtless) human being who simply does not care about even his daughter's happiness. His above-mentioned questions to Felisardo suggest the father's elastic code of ethics could bend toward those of the young man, as Nuño may have been willing to trade Violante's virginity for a face-saving wedding to Felisardo. Yet at no time does Nuño begrudge or even express curiosity about the socio-economic transformations that necessitate his choices, as his narcissistic view keeps him myopically focused on himself, his reputation, and his financial well being. Nonetheless, even these values cannot overcome his impetuosity. Near the end of the play, he threatens his daughter when he finds her in Felisardo's house without her father's permission (3367-72) and

draws his sword on Fadrique when he claims to have another wife and therefore will not marry Violante (3396-3403). Seemingly unaware that if he killed his daughter and prospective son-in-law, he would be endangering his own honor and financial situation, Nuño surrenders to his violent nature. Rosela's epithet for him, "el viejo es endiablado" (3376), has no discernable effect, even after he hears of Felisardo's narrow escape from the Devil. In the end, Nuño remains satisfied with the exculpatory explanation that all had proceeded according to God's will (3682-89).

Fadrique, too, seems content to be led by Providence until distracted by a more advantageous plan. Having made his fortune in America, he returns to Portugal and promises the Virgin to marry the poorest woman of noble birth he can find in exchange for the Holy Mother's rescue at sea during a storm (1019-30). Once on shore, he is enraptured by María's beauty as she gazes upon an image of the Virgin and decides she is the key to fulfilling his vow (1037-64, 1152-56). From there, his moral downfall is quick. Although he feels somewhat indebted to Nuño for covering his father's funeral costs (1220-28), Fadrique really accepts Nuño's offer of betrothal to Violante because it is a financially advantageous match (1294-1311). Fadrique goes from promise breaker to would-be rapist in short order. After beating Felisardo in gambling, he is ready to sexually assault the woman he promised to marry as she lies sleeping near an altar dedicated to the Virgin, dissuaded only at the last moment by her reminder, spoken through María, of his vow (3170-3256).

Like Nuño, Fadrique shows little regret, and less justification, for his actions. Indeed, Azevedo does not seek to complicate his character with soliloquies that expose an inner conflict or yearning desire for another kind of world that favors virtue over wealth. To summarize or explain his actions, Fadrique offers little more than: *los hombres son así*:

Mas como pasado el riesgo  
No hay hombre que no se olvide,  
No sé si por su riqueza,  
Que un rico riquezas sigue,  
Puse mi amor en Violante,  
Olvidando el voto que hice; (3608-13)  
Mas como el deseo incline  
al hombre más para el mal  
que para el bien y le prive

el odio de la razón, (3617-20)  
 determiné aprovecharme  
 (¡qué haya quien tal determine,  
 y tal destino intente!)  
 de la belleza (¡qué crimen!)  
 de doña María, pues  
 la gané a su hermano; (3626-31)

The general fatalism pervading Azevedo's universe is disrupted only by Violante's rather bold action. Early in the play, Nuño's aptly named daughter invites Felisardo to her house without her father's consent via a written note that she throws to him from a window (651-63) yet admits she cannot express her true feelings to her father or refuse his choice of Fadrique for her (1672-87). Nonetheless, when she learns of her father's intent to marry her to the young man, she hatches an eventually unsuccessful plan to go to Felisardo, instructing her servant to tell her father she has joined a convent (2711-24) and, near the end of the play, makes an impassioned plea for individual free choice in marriage (3330-67).

By contrast, María is drawn from beginning to end as particularly submissive, with no experience in love and so resigned to divine will that the only actions she takes are praying to the Virgin and advising others to acquiesce to Providence when circumstances obstruct their goals (1744-46, 1090, 2050-53, 3014-19, 1940-51). Although Azevedo grants María far less initiative, she depicts her as clearly morally superior to the men and just as static in thought. Felisardo's sister shows no interest in acting on her own behalf and never even wonders if she should. Expressing only relief at the end of the play that the heavens have granted the spouse she wants, she, like virtually every other character, avers no outrage or even disappointment in Felisardo's actions nor questions his right to trade her in the first place. With the exception of the *gracioso* Sombrero, who says he would strike Felisardo were he in María's place (2468-69), male prerogative over women's bodies goes unquestioned.

Violante's actions notwithstanding, Azevedo's strategy in *Dicha y desdicha* seems to be to depict all characters as disinterested in the possibility of different social and moral values and behaviors as are Fadrique and Nuño. This pervasive and apparently willful ignorance of why women's independence may be needed and of how to achieve it indicate the solution is beyond human capabilities, highlighting the necessity of supernatural

involvement especially in the would-be rape scene. María is not just innocent, but possesses a faith not unlike that of a child who trusts her elders to know best how to protect her. Her purity and naïveté, combined with her general ignorance of the world and of Fadrique's immediate intentions while she sleeps, make for an episode of extreme pathos that arouses spectators' fears. Despite the Virgin's action, they are left with the thought of what might have transpired absent the divine intervention.

The central message is one of human and divine, mostly male, impotency in the face of such dire situations. There are seemingly some problems only a female deity can resolve. In the face of a generalized fatalism, human male insensitivity and cruelty, and supernatural male malevolence, the Virgin will do what she must—even physically battling demons and invading dreams—to restore moral order.

### *Conclusion*

While *La Margarita del Tajo* teaches that women's submission to God's will is the surest way to a reward (albeit in the next life) and *Dicha y desdicha* compensates both the rebellious Violante and the devoted María by granting husbands of their choosing, it is difficult to determine exactly what men have to do to be punished in the here and now. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land and traditional marriage hardly seem like just remedies for the many transgressions the men perpetrate or sufficient deterrents to repeating their crimes. While Azevedo offers no sentence satisfactory to twenty-first century minds, she does emphasize the closer relationship to the divine that women enjoy as well as their consent in the adventures that play out. Irene's regular study of scripture and frequent conversations with God's angel certainly signifies a life more moral and a relationship more intimate with God than any of the men can claim. She is informed of and consents to God's plan every step of the way. Woman's mediation between heaven and earth becomes so strong in *Dicha y desdicha* that the divine takes a powerful female form in the guise of the Virgin Mary. If Azevedo cannot conceive of a publishable fitting punishment for male misbehavior, she chooses instead to deemphasize their moral value in order to empower and uplift women's roles in this life and the next.



Fig. 1. Francesco Melanzio, *Madonna del Soccorso* (1494);  
Abbey of San Felice, Giano del Umbria, Italy.



Fig. 2. Domenico di Zanobi, aka Master of the Johnson Nativity, *Madonna del Soccorso* (1475-85); Cappella Santo Spirito, Florence.



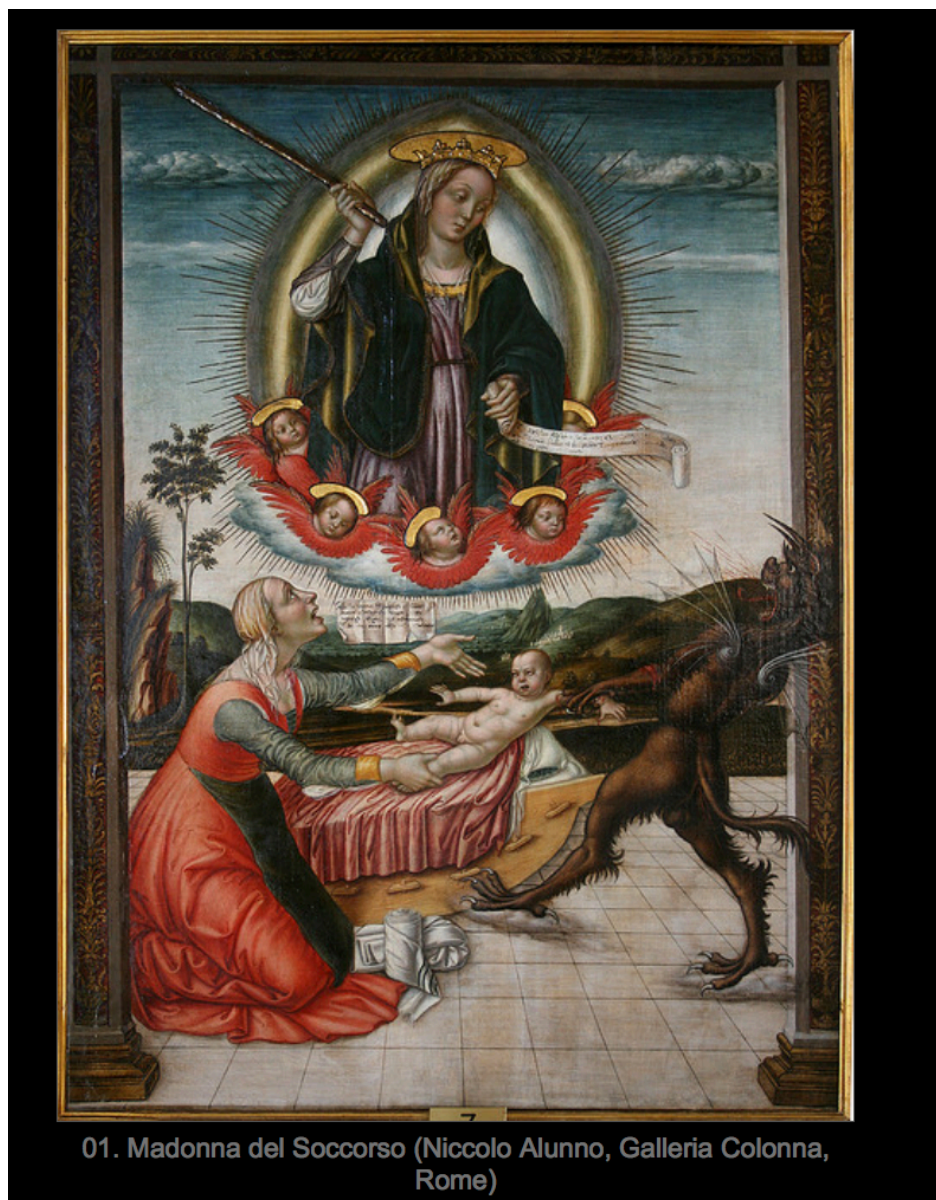


Fig. 3. Niccolo Alunno *Madonna del Soccorso* (c. 1497); Galleria Colonna, Rome.



Fig. 4. Anonymous, *Madonna del Soccorso* (early sixteenth century);  
Cappella Madonna del Soccorso, n.p., Italy





Fig. 5. Anonymous, sculpture of the Virgin striking Satan (thirteenth century); north portal of Notre Dame de Paris; rpt. in Warner 323-24.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is widely believed Azevedo's three extant works—*El muerto disimulado* is the third—were written during the time of her service at court to Queen Isabel de Borbón. It is not known when she arrived at court, but her service ended upon the death of the queen in 1644 (Scott Soufas qtd. in *Women's Acts* 2). For a different view on dates of composition, see Wade 326.

<sup>2</sup> All references to the dramatic texts will be given by verse number according to the Scott Soufas edition.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming Irene belongs to a Benedictine convent, she undergoes what must be an accelerated expulsion process since the *Rule of Saint Benedict* provides for a truly repentant wayward sister to be readmitted three times before irrevocable expulsion.

<sup>4</sup> Left unexplained is exactly why Irene earns the title of martyr. Martyrdom is defined by the Catholic Church as “the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith,” but at no point is she asked to renounce it or convert to another. The men who plot against her also ostensibly share this same faith (Catholic Church 2473).

<sup>5</sup> Why she cannot continue to live under the supervision of her father-in-law is left unexplained.

<sup>6</sup> See also Warner, xxiii.

<sup>7</sup> The Virgin even calls the Devil “dragón infernal” (2942) just before her rescue of Felisardo.

<sup>8</sup> Gascón points out these shortcomings (*The Woman Saint* 141), but goes a bit too far in asserting Felisardo “never supplements his faith with diligence at any point in the play” (142) as the young man does try to negotiate with Nuño to marry Violante in act two.

<sup>9</sup> The Spanish honor code of this era afforded any nobleman the right to kill his sister, wife, or daughter if suspected of extramarital sex (Mujica xl). For more on the fact and fiction of wife-murder plays in the seventeenth century, see Heiple.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the spectacular effects of *tramoya* plays before and during Azevedo's time at the Spanish court, see Shergold, 264-302.

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