



MARY AND THE POLITICS OF
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
SPANISH THEATER



THE COMEDIA OF
VIRGINITY

Mirzam C. Pérez



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Spanish Theater*



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To my Queen and King,
Rosario Fernández (1942–2003) and Augusto Pérez (1936–2007),
monarchs of a kingdom past,
and
to my Princesses,
Claudia Carolina and Emma Lucia,
future rulers of a world of endless possibilities.

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Introduction

Few figures inhabited early modern Spanish consciousness with less ambiguity than the Virgin Mary. No matter what sphere of seventeenth-century Iberian society one turns to—the court, the Church, the stage, the academy, or far-flung imperial outposts in the New World—she is always present, presented, and represented as the pure, univalent image, the exemplar of the unambiguous exemplar. She appears, at first glance, to be so uniformly idealized, and so comfortable on her man-made pedestal, as the passive, obedient, chaste, pious woman that only with grave difficulty can it be sensed how, when, and where she was made into an image of a profound negative feminine capability. One remains helpless before the vastness of Mary's ubiquitous, seemingly denotative presence in the Spanish imagination.¹

And yet, the Mary that often emanates from Spanish depictions of the Virgin in paintings, in religious tracts, in political debates, and, especially, in dramatic figurations of her on the Spanish *comedia* stage had multiple definitions and associations assigned to her. Sorting through the various Marys reveals a complex, strong feminine figure tucked away by her many Hapsburg avatars.

Hapsburg Mary often contained her own shadow. Wrapped inside her many feminine folds can be found coded and not-so-coded references

in which she often reveals herself as anything but an unambiguous archetype. She begins to emerge, when imaginatively and rightly understood in her various Hapsburg contexts, as an exemplar of paradox, an imaginary (in the original sense of that word) container for both secular and sacred femininity. She enfolds strength and weakness, passivity and activity. She even teases with a uniquely Spanish Hapsburg style of sexuality.

On the Spanish stage the complex and empowered model that Mary epitomized became the exception and not the rule. Nuanced, willful, and engaged female characters were uncommon in Hapsburg Spanish theater. Women did not manipulate the dramatic action, nor did they inspire their fellow actors or audience. Female characters were objects of men's love and desire, a human currency to increase or diminish male honor. From time to time, the strict formulaic conventions of the *comedia* were placed aside to allow a strong female to emerge in the form of a woman that opposed a marriage arranged on her behalf or avoided the advances of an undesired suitor. In extreme cases she was the exceptional woman that in the absence of worthy men avenged her own honor. Yet, most of these females on stage eventually acquiesced to societal expectations and married the men they had originally shunned. By the end of the third act of the *comedia*, the multifaceted woman had vanished and been replaced with a more traditional and controllable representation of femininity: a woman subjugated to the authority of her father or her husband, again.²

The staging of the purest and most perfect of all women, the Virgin Mary, allowed playwrights to integrate a complex and gendered exemplar in Spain's Catholic and monarchical theater. Close, critical readings of three seldom-studied *comedias*, written in the 1600s, show how creatively male and female playwrights drew from and promoted the cult of the Virgin Mary in post-Tridentine Spain. In the selected plays, compelling Marian characterizations and appearances depart from the passive, submissive, and inanimate representations of the Virgin. Instead, the mother of God is evoked as a proactive, articulate, and, at times, belligerent female role model that simultaneously inspires, guides, and protects the faithful. She is the mother, the warrior, the mediator, the defender, and the counselor.

What follows traces how the Virgin's ubiquitous iconographic presence in Spanish society appears, drawing not only from the visual arts

and letters, but also from folk legends, songs, popular street rituals, and religious feasts. Marian-themed *comedias* allowed authorial subjects and their patrons to articulate their personal stance on King Philip III's and King Philip IV's aggressive measures in defense of both the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Mary. Theater enabled these playwrights to produce innovative and entertaining interpretations of the Virgin. Exploiting the popular folk traditions of the Marian cult and its attendant iconography and symbolism, these authors drew energies from the devotion to Mary and channeled them in the direction of the court in order to legitimize Hapsburg monarchical authority.

Dramatists also used the cult of the Virgin Mary to comment upon the political authority of Hapsburg women. Inspired by court and religious art, these playwrights cleverly constructed the Virgin Mary as a divinely ordained model and popularly sanctioned source of inspiration for Hapsburg queens. They refashioned the Virgin Mary into a model of chastity, motherhood, and sobriety and entertained a patriarchal, staunchly Catholic audience with orthodox definitions of the queenly and the womanly, but they did so by employing the most unorthodox dramatic means. They turned to the Virgin of the masses and reconstructed her, offering her to an audience of subjects and rulers as an orthodox model by which the populace and nobles alike could compare and contrast their real-world queen to an otherworldly female, divine model. Hapsburg queens were humanized by ironic parallel constructions of comparisons between the queen's similarities to Mary and the unrealistic expectations the queen's subjects held of her.

Drawing inspiration, as well as images, symbols, and doctrine, from the cult of the Virgin Mary, the dramatists examined here seized upon Mary as a devious means by which to undermine the patriarchal, misogynistic ideals of the Church. By making highly ambiguous images of the Virgin and presenting them on the stage, they made unambiguously critical comments upon the power of actual females in Spanish society. These female-oriented comments were specifically aimed at the court and were meant to carry a specifically political, secular message. Unexpectedly, Mary's strangely transformative, multivalent energies did not flow in one direction, from artist to court, from stage to altar. In the examples of the early modern dramatists, one sees how multilayered, secularized depictions of Mary transformed the methods, scope,

and ambitions of the Spanish stage, elevating it toward the realm of the sacred. As one gains deeper understanding of the political, theological, and moral circumstances affecting the dramatic choices made by each playwright, the patrons, and the audience itself, one can perceive the multiple layers of significance built into these dramas and capture how the Hapsburg Mary's avatars reveal the intense convergence between the arts, theater, religion, and the Hapsburg monarchy in seventeenth-century Spain.

The complexity of Mary's avatars uncovers the rich and intricate tapestry that was Spanish early modern culture. Like Mary, Spain too was rife with contradictions and ambiguities, ranging from attempts to achieve political and religious unity while simultaneously adhering to practices of ethnic intolerance; and from passionate defense of Spain's geographically widespread territories while blatantly disregarding rampant inflation and unemployment in the mainland. Although on the surface these plays appear to praise and exalt the magnificence of the Spanish Empire, they also reveal undertones of economic decay, institutional anxieties, and moral corruption that cannot be ignored.

Dramatic representations of the Virgin Mary provided an acceptable avenue to approach and comment on national sensibilities. Mary's avatars enabled dramatists to venture into journeys of self-revelation that simultaneously acknowledged and disguised existing trepidations over the viability of the empire.

1

The Politics of Theater at the University of Salamanca

Félix Lope de Vega's (1562–1635) drama *La limpieza no manchada* (1618) provides unparalleled insight into the cultural significance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the construction of the Virgin Mary as a divine axis of political and religious power in early modern Spain. Incorporating prevalent religious imagery by means of the popular theatrical form of the *comedia*, this play is one of a variety of measures undertaken by the University of Salamanca in 1618 to endorse King Philip III's (1578–1621) zeal for the belief supporting the Virgin Mary's exception from original sin.¹ This religious doctrine, which had been enthusiastically endorsed by previous Spanish Hapsburg monarchs, continued to be, during Philip III's rule, a source of contention among members of the clergy and the religious orders as the belief had not been confirmed as dogma.² Within this historical and cultural context, Lope's *La limpieza no manchada* is an example of academic theater used to promote religious piety within the student body of the University of Salamanca.³ The dramatization of Mary's unique state of purity worked to strengthen the political ties of Spain's oldest and most important university with the Hapsburg monarchy.

La limpieza no manchada's protagonist is Saint Bridget (1303–1373), a popular Spanish saint known for her spiritual revelations and writings

on the Virgin and Child.⁴ Throughout his work, Lope de Vega directs attention to Bridget's contemplation of the mystery of original sin and man's fall from grace. The drama follows her as she questions the viability of Mary's purity, before eventually coming to terms with it. The three-act play opens with an intellectual debate between Saint Bridget and the allegorical characters of Doubt, Sin, Contemplation, and Faith. Each of these figures puts forward relevant biblical examples in favor of and against the possibility of Mary's unique exception from sin. Saint Bridget deliberates eloquently with these characters, trying to balance reason and religious faith in her arguments. The lengthy dialogue brings about the necessary understanding and conviction for Saint Bridget and Doubt to finally understand the Virgin's immaculacy.⁵ The play concludes with a vibrant celebration in honor of the oath of the Immaculate Conception, replicating on stage the oath that also took place among students, faculty, and administrators. An array of characters, including countries, allegorical representations, colonial subjects from the Spanish American territories, and Africans, swear to defend their belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Since its first publication, Lope's *La limpieza no manchada* has received little attention from critics. What attention the work has received has erroneously tended to compare this work to traditional types of *comedias* of love, adventure, and marriage from the author's more famous corpus. The work has not been analyzed within its historical context, and its value as a cultural product of particular political circumstances has been overlooked. No consideration has been given to the role of this work in the academic patronage of the cult of the Immaculate Conception; critics have failed to consider how a work like *La limpieza no manchada* evidences the issue of academic politics in early modern Spanish society. Much of the commentary on the play has been limited to disparaging statements regarding its apparently minimal literary merit.⁶ However, *La limpieza no manchada* merits further analysis for its cultural and historical relevance to the study of Hapsburg Spain. Despite allegedly possessing a fragmented, disjointed style, Lope's work simultaneously captures the spirit of early modern academic disputes and the essence of religious iconography incorporated into church feasts. These connections, which might seem obvious, have previously been missed when the play has been studied in a historical and cultural vacuum. Furthermore, although on

the surface the work certainly appears as an uncomplicated, faith-based commission intended to foster student enthusiasm, its intrinsic value resides in its ability to illuminate the complex relationship between religion, politics, and Spanish identity in early modern Spain. *La limpieza no manchada* is a drama adapted to the particular religious and political needs of an academic client, the University of Salamanca. As such, this Marian-themed play allows a beginning understanding of how theater worked as an effective, influential tool to bolster the political and social power of an academic institution within a monarchical state.

The University of Salamanca

As the most important purveyor of bureaucrats to the monarchy and as a reputable institution justifiably preoccupied with staging a play that should be “*tan limada, agena de indecencia y representada con tal compostura y propiedad*” (so finely crafted, with no indecency and represented with such circumspection and propriety), the University of Salamanca hired a top candidate for the job: Lope de Vega. The process was described in the festival book *Relación de las fiestas que la Universidad de Salamanca celebró desde 27 hasta 31 de Octubre del Año 1618* (Description of the festivities that the University of Salamanca celebrated from 27 to 31 October of the year of 1618), a text that will be discussed in more detail below.⁷ Not only was Lope the most famous and prolific dramatist of the commercial *corrales* (playhouses) in Madrid, he was also an ordained Franciscan priest with commensurate religious convictions and priorities.⁸

The play’s commission came on the heels of a regulation passed by the university requiring all its students to defend the purity of the Virgin. This statute read as follows:

Estatuto

Que todos los que se graduaren e incorporaren en esta Universidad, en cualquiera facultad que sea, desde el primer grado hasta el último, antes de recibir dichos grados juren que tendrán, enseñarán y defenderán pública e particularmente, que la Virgen Santísima nuestra Señora fue concebida sin mancha original, y no haciendo el dicho juramento no sean admitidos a los dichos grados, ni a alguno dellos en forma, o manera alguna.

(That all who graduate from or join this University in any school, from the first grade until the last, before receiving these degrees

must swear that they will keep, teach, and publicly and privately defend that the most holy Virgin, Our Lady, was conceived without original sin and not swearing this they will not be granted their degrees in any way.)⁹

The statute had been issued as a response to the popularized cult of the Immaculate Conception throughout Spain. Other universities of equal caliber had instituted a similar oath within their student bodies with grandiose spectacles. Such was the case for the University of Alcalá on September 8, 1617, and the University of Baeza in 1618.¹⁰ Concerned with imitating such public academic displays of piety and political support for the monarchy, the University of Salamanca instituted the statute and organized relevant festivities too.

The underlying intention behind the adoption of the decree was political in nature. The University of Salamanca supported and encouraged Philip III's attempts to establish the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as dogma, a goal that had evaded his efforts through many long years.¹¹ Wishing to buttress the king's agenda, the university made a political statement of support with the adoption of the decree.¹²

The University of Salamanca's enthusiasm for this project included the publication of *Relación de las fiestas que la Universidad de Salamanca celebró desde 27 hasta 31 de Octubre del Año 1618*, printed in December 1618, a couple of months after the celebrations. Written by an anonymous author, the book was intended to record and preserve all the details of the activities leading to the oath as well as the actual celebrations. The University of Salamanca's concern with informing, pleasing, and securing the king's approval at every step of the process is evident in the first pages of the account. The text states that the institution solicited King Philip III's final confirmation of the statute with his *Consejo de Justicia* (Justice Council), which allowed the appropriate implementation of the regulation (3). Reportedly, the king acquiesced: "*con gran demostración de gusto, lo que por su parte se le pedía*" (with great show of delight he responded as to what was requested from him) (5). The monarch also sent a letter, which was received and read at the university on July 10, 1618, in which he commended Salamanca for its initiative in this devout matter and confirmed his approval of the statute. After acquiring the king's regal endorsement, the university set about organizing the collective oath and commissioning the play to Lope de Vega (8). *La limpieza no manchada* was