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“When Venus stays awake, Minerva sleeps”: a narrative of female sanctity in eighteenth-century Spain

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ABSTRACT

Written records of confession provide exceptional insight into private histories of women and the gender dynamics that shaped them. The sacrament of confession entailed an implicit inequality between men and women, given that the priest was considered to be shrouded in divine power while the penitent had to submit herself to his moral authority. Nevertheless, confession also offered women the opportunity to express themselves and to discuss and understand their spiritual concerns. Some hoped their confessors would recognize their religious charisma, which would involve an affirmation of individuality, autonomy and personal power.

In Spain, we find key information about interactions between confessors and female penitents in inquisitorial trials. Specifically, sixteenth- to nineteenth-century records pertaining to the crime of solicitation shed light on such relationships. Whereas other offences were publicized, for moralizing or intimidating ends, the abusive use of confession by many clergymen – who sexually seduced and took advantage of their penitents – was kept secret to avoid disgracing the sacrament.

An exception to this rule is found in the anti-papist treatise written by Antonio Gavín (1682–1750), a Spanish priest who, after converting to Protestantism in 1715 and adopting a rational religiosity, decided to denounce what he considered the false and corrupt practices of the Catholic Church, presenting his country as an antithesis to the Enlightenment. Gavín dedicated a considerable part of his work to describing relationships between confessors and their female penitents. Based on an inquisitorial trial that began in 1705, the account of Francisca Guerrero and her confessor, Miguel Navarro, holds special interest. Navarro himself was in charge of sanctifying the penitent and presenting her as a *beata*, which brought her substantial fame until her ultimate fall from grace.

KEYWORDS

Enlightenment; confession; gender; sanctity; miracles

“Talk to me as if I were a confessor: I am your husband”.¹

Accounts of auricular, or private, confession make up one of the richest sources of documentary evidence about the private lives of women. In theory, the sacrament of penance presupposed an implicit inequality between the sexes, given that priests were thought to be invested with divine power and female penitents were expected to submit to their

authority. Confessors were more than mere interlocutors, they were judges, and the sentences passed down via absolution were part of canon law (as revealed by the expression “tribunal of penitence”: see Petite [1796]; Dufour [1996]). However, confession also offered women an opportunity to express themselves and to undergo spiritual growth. Some turned to their confessor not just in need of a confidant, but also in search of official recognition of certain divinely conferred charismatic gifts, which in turn would give them a degree of autonomy and personal power (see Bilinkoff 2005).

Most of what we know about the interaction between confessors and female penitents comes from spiritual biographies written by one party or the other, although in fact in many cases there was close collaboration between the two (Bilinkoff 2005, 76–95). Where Spain is concerned, further information can be found in the records of inquisitorial trials brought between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries for the crime of solicitation. Strictly speaking, solicitation (from *solicit*: “to petition”, but also “to court or beg the favour of a woman”) is the offence committed by any priest who takes advantage of the intimate setting of the confessional to touch his parishioners inappropriately or make sexual demands on them. In a broader sense, the misuse of the sacrament of penance with the intention of encouraging others to commit sins of lust (Fanning 1912) can also be understood as an indirect, insidious form of moral seduction. (On the crime of solicitation, see Sarrión Mora [1994]; Alejandre [1994]; Haliczzer [1996].)

The task of prosecuting this crime had traditionally fallen within the remit of bishops, but in Spain, from 1561 onwards, it came under the control of the Inquisition.² Whereas other crimes were made public for purposes of moral instruction, the abuse of the confessional on the part of many clerics to seduce or take advantage of their penitents was considered a “hidden crime” and was kept absolutely secret by the Holy Office so as not to discredit the sacrament (Alejandre 1994, 151). An early exception to this rule can be found in Antonio Gavín’s anti-Catholic, anti-papist exposé *A Master-Key to Popery*, first published in 1724. Devoted to denouncing the practices of the Catholic Church as false and corrupt, his treatise is divided into five parts, of which the first claims to be a revelation of the most secretive and, in the author’s view, most scandalous facets of confession. At the very beginning of his treatise he states: “I take it to be exceedingly criminal, and I do, from my soul, abhor it” (Gavín 1773, 9).

Although his name is virtually unknown today, Antonio Gavín (1682–1750) was one of the most widely read Spanish writers outside Spain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ruiz 2014). Having been ordained as a Catholic priest, he practised his ministry in Zaragoza until he went into self-imposed exile in London, converting to Anglicanism in 1715. After that he travelled widely, coming into contact with a broad range of ideological influences firstly in Europe and then in the New World, where he spent the last years of his life as a parson-missionary in the colony of Virginia (Lamarca Langa 2008, 5–71).

Some of the episodes Gavín experienced firsthand provide exceptional documentary evidence for the field of gender studies. Of particular interest is his account of the lives of Francisca Guerrero and her confessor, Miguel Navarro y Soria, based on the record of a 1705 inquisitorial trial at which he was one of a large number of priests called to be present.³ Here, as in the treatise as a whole, he was driven by the desire to expose and criticize what from his point of view were the superstitions, hypocrisy and perversions of the Catholic religion. This compulsion reflects the fact that he had undergone an extreme conversion from a kind of childlike, credulous faith to a rational, inward and

austere religiosity. (On the Spanish Enlightenment as a movement inseparable from religious thinking, see Mestre [1979]; Egido López [1990]; Sorkin [2008]; Lehner and Printy [2013].)

Gavín saw the clarity and lucidity he had acquired through his conversion to Protestantism as a genuine reawakening, a state of mind he contrasts with what he considers the lethargy and ignorance of most of his Catholic compatriots, whose beliefs he compares to an opiate-induced dream, anticipating Karl Marx's famous metaphor (see Pedersen 2015, 354). He seems, therefore, to be applying the characteristic language of the so-called Age of Reason to a particular way of understanding faith, one not antithetical to rationalism and learning. As part of a section on the Bull of the Crusade,⁴ his treatise includes a discussion of the idea that souls can be rescued from purgatory, which he dismisses as being "against the evidence of natural reason ... a dream, fiction, or to say the truth, roguery, robbery and a cheat of the Pope and Priests". He goes on to ask God "to give to all the Romans such a light as his infinite goodness has been pleased to grant me", so that they see that the text of the Bull "is only a dream, a dose of opium to lull them asleep, and keep them always ignorant" (Gavín 1773, 150–151).

Gavín's enlightened perspective is, however, clothed in sensationalist garb, designed to cater to Protestant readers disposed to believe the worst of Catholics. Recounted in a tone of irony and ridicule, the story of the relationship between Francisca Guerrero and her confessor, details of which follow below, is summed up in an expressive Latin phrase (probably coined by Gavín himself) about the sleep of reason. Just as, decades later, his compatriot Goya depicted a sleeping figure in No. 43 of his *Caprichos* as an example of reason defeated ("La fantasía abandonada de la razón produce monstruos, y unida con ella es madre de las artes"; Helman [1983]), Antonio Gavín stated: "Quando Venus vigilat, Minerva dormit". Minerva, favourite goddess of the Enlightenment, was associated with reason and wisdom, while the reference to Venus, goddess of love, is clearly meant to suggest that the relationship between priest and parishioner was based on passion rather than piety.⁵

The story of Francisca and her confessor is reminiscent, if anything, of one of the tales told in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (notably the third tale of the third day). Gavín's account steers a course somewhere between truth and fiction. Beneath his gleefully anticlerical tone, however, lay a tragic reality. The Inquisition archives contain evidence that both Navarro and Guerrero were tried, although the complete documentation relating to their cases has not been found.⁶ While some details of Gavín's account may not be rigorously accurate, Genaro Lamarca Langa states that "la fiabilidad de su información es casi plena, con tan solo alguna pequeña duda y algún pequeño error" (2008, 48).

The facts can be summarized as follows: an ordinary woman, the wife of a tailor, had as her confessor a Dominican friar and doctor of divinity who had studied at the University of Zaragoza and was greatly respected in that city. The relationship between them became increasingly intimate as the priest began to promote her supposed sanctity both in writing and by word of mouth. Before long, he had moved into her home, a situation that enabled both to improve not only their material wealth but also their social and religious standing in the local community and further afield. Just two years later, however, in 1705, Francisca was denounced to the Inquisition, accused of causing the death of a child,

and both individuals were brought to trial. Francisca died a few months after this in an inquisitorial prison, having given birth to a child probably fathered by the priest. Navarro, meanwhile, was exiled from his monastery for a number of years but then returned without a stain on his character. He eventually died at the age of eighty-four.⁷

From the outset, Gavín shows no sympathy for Francisca (whom he calls Mary, in order to fictionalize her story).⁸ Instead, he blames her for taking the initiative in terms of seeking out a confessor who suited her purposes. Casting her clearly not as a victim, but as the villain of the piece, he presumes her to be guilty as charged, brought down by overweening ambition. Fascinating as his narrative is, we clearly need to read between the lines and not take his sexist assumptions at face value, intended as they are to censure not so much Catholic confessors but the penitents who use them for their own self-interest. Gavín's account begins like this:

In the city of Zaragoza, near the college of St Thomas of Villanueva, did live Mary Guerrero, married to a taylor; she was handsome, witty, and ambitious: but as the rank of a taylor's wife could not make her shine among the quality, she undertook the life of a *beata*, to be known by it in the city. The first step she was to make was to chuse a confessor of good parts, and of a good reputation among the nobility; she pitched upon the reverend father Fr. Michael Navarro, a Dominican Fryar, who was D.D. and a man universally well beloved for his doctrine and good behaviour. But, *quando Venus vigilat, Minerva dormit*. She began to confess to him, and in less than a year, by her feigned modesty, and hypocritical airs; and by confessing no sins, but the religious exercises of her life, the reverend father began to publish in the city her sanctity to the highest pitch. (1773, 68–69)

In Gavín's biased opinion, Francisca only decided to lead the life of a *beata*⁹ and seek out a particularly illustrious priest as her confessor because she was desperate to climb the social ladder. This is a reversal of the cliché of the abuse of the confessional, attributing all responsibility to the woman for the relationship that established itself between the two of them. As Jodi Bilinkoff has shown, however, she was hardly alone among women in expressing a heartfelt desire to find a good confessor (2005, 76–78). This was seen not so much in monastic communities as among laywomen with an intense spiritual life, because the latter were much more vulnerable to accusations of heresy, demonic possession, deception and so on. Given these dangers, having their beliefs and practices officially sanctioned by a reputable priest was essential (see Montes Bernárdez 2002).

As for Francisca, she certainly profited for a while from the renown of her sanctity, as publicized by her confessor, but he equally benefited from his close association with her. We need to remember that in the early modern period the deep-rooted belief persisted that, however wise or devout a man might be, God would not as a rule communicate directly with him, but would do so via women, who were less well-educated but humbler creatures (see Bilinkoff 2005, 80; 1997, 49–52). Gavín thought that confessor and theologian Miguel Navarro's ambiguous behaviour in both promoting Francisca and hiding her away could have been based on self-interest – whether professional (“in expectation of a bishopric, for the making of a saint”) or personal (“or the better to conceal his private designs”) – or even on the fact that he had been “bewitched by her” (1773, 69). He goes on to tell his readers that the fame of “the *blessed* Guerrero”, as she was by now becoming known, grew to such an extent that “many ladies and gentlemen of the first rank, desirous to see the new saint, sent for her”, but Navarro refused

these requests on the basis that Francisca was a woman of virtue and modesty. Nevertheless, the mystery surrounding her “was a new addition to the fame of her sanctity, and a new incitement to the ladies to see her” and, impelled by their curiosity, “rich and poor, old and young, men and women, began to resort to her neighbour’s house, and the Dominican church”. Guerrero, however, “shewed a great displeasure at these popular demonstrations of respect, and resolved to keep close at home” (Gavín 1773, 69).

Voluntary feminine seclusion was a phenomenon particularly characteristic of the late Middle Ages, the period in which it began to become more popular in urban areas and to provoke suspicion among the clergy because of the hordes of worshippers attracted by some recluses renowned for their saintliness (see Vauchez 1981, 229). In principle, these women opted for isolation in search of a closer, more intense relationship with God but, as Georges Minois (2013, 147–148) points out,

Rien de moins solitaires que ces saintes femmes avec leur cohorte de servantes, de pauvres, de clercs, de confesseurs, de quémanteurs, de copines, de curieux et d’admirateurs. Elles fréquentent certainement plus de monde que la bourgeoise ou la paysanne ordinaire, et leur solitude est une fausse solitude.

(No one could have been less solitary than these holy women with their retinue of servants, paupers, clerks, confessors, beggars, friends, onlookers and admirers. They certainly mixed more with the world than the ordinary peasant woman or bourgeois lady, and their solitude was a false solitude.)

By the eighteenth century, the number of voluntary recluses or “walled-in” women had considerably diminished, but there were still female ascetics living a life of solitude and isolation – not, as noted by Brother José Teixidor, “as a punishment for any crime committed, but freely and willingly and with the approval of their confessors, and the assent of their families, to do penance, devote themselves to contemplation, and to achieve other good ends” (1895, 2:247). We know something of the exemplary lives of these women from a treatise (Orellana 1887) written in 1801 and expanded six years later, which reveals that spiritual reclusion, as both an individual and, in particular, a collective practice, persisted beyond the turn of the nineteenth century.

While most of those who opted to retire from society were spinsters or widows, there were also some married women who took refuge in their own homes to dedicate themselves entirely to their devotions: “Su vivienda o reclusión se llamó en unas emparedamiento, en otras celda, en otras ermita, en otras cueva, en otras cuarto, en otras casa” (Orellana 1887, 21). Gavín tells us that Francisca, overwhelmed by the numbers thronging to see her, “resolved to keep close at home, and after a long consultation with the Father Navarro, they agreed that she should keep her room, and that he would go to confess her, and say Mass in her room” (1773, 69). He could do so because it was one of the privileges of mendicant orders such as the Dominicans to be allowed to say mass by setting up a portable altar wherever they happened to be (Campo del Pozo 2016, 359). What is far more extraordinary, at least to our way of thinking today, is the fact that her husband was forced to move out of his own home, to support his wife’s decision, and that, a year later, her confessor himself took up residence there, taking on the role of her “spiritual husband”.¹⁰ Once Francisca had decided to keep to her room,

the Father charged her husband to quit the house, and never appear before his wife, for his sight would be a great hindrance to his wife's sanctity and purity, and the poor sot, believing everything, went away and took a lodging for himself and apprentice. (Gavín 1773, 69–70)

In general, most Catholics confessed and received the Eucharist no more than once a week, twice at most. Only in very exceptional cases were there people who received both sacraments every day (Bilinkoff 2005, 20–21). Francisca must have been visited by her confessor on a daily basis for an entire year,

but the fatigue of going every day to say Mass and confess the *blessed* being too great for the reverend, he asked leave from the reverend Father Buenacasa, then prior of the convent, to go and live with her as a spiritual guide. (Gavín 1773, 70)

In Gavín's anticlerical take on the situation, the prior of Zaragoza's Dominican monastery, Brother Pedro Mártir de Buenacasa, gave him leave because he assumed it would be advantageous for his community, and so the confessor "went for good and all to be her lodger and master of the house" (1773, 70).

Thereafter, his efforts to promote Francisca's sanctity became far more overt and directly aimed at drawing in the public. Her life in holy seclusion was to follow the traditional model. Just as, by convention, any communication between those living in "soledad prodigiosa"¹¹ and the outside world "usually took place through a small, often barred window" (L'Hermite Leclercq 1994, 154), so Gavín tells us,

When the Father was in the house, he began by degrees to give permission to the people now and then to see the *blessed*, through the glass of a little window, desiring them not to make a noise, for fear of disturbing the *blessed* in her exercise of devotion. She was in her own room always upon her knees, when some people were to see her through the glass, which was in the wall between her room and that of the reverend. (1773, 70)

In Gavín's eyes, Francisca was entirely without scruples and was affecting sanctity solely with a view to improving her own and her confessor's social and economic standing. He tells of her meetings with two highly prestigious figures – the archbishop of Zaragoza and the viceroy of Aragón¹² – who "not being permitted by his royal representation to go to her, did send his coach one night for her, and both the Father and the *blessed* had the honour to sup in private with his Excellency" (Gavín 1773, 70). Once stories of her contacts with nobility began to spread, Francisca's popularity increased even further, as did the number of gifts that were brought to her. Gavín tells us that she gained such a reputation and so many letters arrived from important people that Navarro "was obliged to take a secretary under him, and a porter to keep the door, for they had removed to another house of better appearance, and more conveniency" (71).

Given Francisca's aura of sanctity, most of those who wanted to see her were suffering from ill health, and came "in hopes to be healed by her sight". After two years, however, her reputation as a healer and miracle worker was turned against her. One day, her next-door neighbour, a surgeon's wife, brought her ten-month-old child to Francisca for her to kiss him, "thinking that by such an holy kiss, her child would be happy forever". Francisca "took the child and bid the mother leave him with her for a quarter of an hour". When she returned him to his mother, however, she told her that "her child was to die the night following, for so God had revealed to her". The child did indeed die the following night (Gavín 1773, 70–71). As a result of her prophesy, and conceivably because of preexisting

disputes between the neighbours, Francisca – to whom the gift of healing was attributed – was accused of causing the child’s death. In a turn of events not dissimilar to those found in the records of many witchcraft trials (see Tausiet 2004), the boy’s father said he had found “some spots and marks in his child’s body”. And, according to Gavín, since he was a surgeon, he opened up the body “and found in it the cause of its unfortunate death, which was a dose of poison”. Therefore, “upon this suspicion of the child’s being poisoned, and the foretelling his death by the *blessed*”, the surgeon did not hesitate in denouncing Francisca Guerrero to the Inquisition as the presumed murderer of his son (1773, 71).

According to Gavín, therefore, Francisca first bewitched her confessor and then poisoned a baby. There is some irony in the fact that a woman aspiring to sanctity should have ended up facing accusations of witchcraft. And yet the dividing line between the two was as permeable as that between good and evil, especially when it came to women supposedly in possession of miraculous powers.¹³ It was not unusual in trials brought during the early modern period to distinguish between “genuine” and “false” holiness for a single individual to be cast as both saint and witch (see Schutte 2001, 95–104). This dichotomy indicates a distinction between the concepts of *miracle* and *magic* (Parish 2005). From a Catholic viewpoint, the two could not be further apart from one another, but from the perspective of the Protestant reformers, and to an even greater extent that of the enlightened thinkers of the eighteenth century, there was simply no distinction between the two. Believing in the miraculous, whether divine or demonic in origin, was an irrational form of behaviour that kept old superstitions alive, or indeed a form of deliberate deception (see Twelftree 2011). One of the most widespread Protestant arguments – and a real commonplace in seventeenth-century England – was that the age of miracles was long past.¹⁴ This was based on the assumption that all supernatural events claimed by Catholicism to stem from divine intervention were fakery, at worst invented for reasons of self-interest or to fool the unwise, at best arising from subjective interpretations.¹⁵

The view that miracles belonged exclusively to the age of the first apostles – intrinsically linked to infantile mentalities and unnecessary once Christianity had established itself – was closely tied to Protestantism’s attempt to align itself with the powers of knowledge and the Enlightenment. This is not to say that most of its followers did not continue to harbour a multiplicity of beliefs that contradicted the movement towards disenchantment conventionally associated with Protestantism.¹⁶ The question of miracles prompted perhaps the most intense intellectual controversy to unfold in England in the first half of the eighteenth century, with discussions rooted at the intersection between the fields of science, philosophy and religion (see Burns 1981).

The Enlightenment debate on miracles was broadly focused on the notoriously sceptical essay published by David Hume in 1748 as part of his *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Beauchamp 1998, 169–186). Other gainsayers had expressed themselves on the subject in Britain before him, but their voices had not really made themselves heard.¹⁷ One notable example is the unorthodox Anglican Thomas Woolston (1688–1733). Having interpreted Scripture from an allegorical perspective and produced a courageous collection of discourses that denied that even Christ’s miracles had actually taken

place (Woolston 1727–1730), Woolston eventually died in jail, having been imprisoned on charges of blasphemy (Burns 1981, 44).

Antonio Gavín, whose anti-papist treatise appeared at around the same time as Woolston was writing, anticipated this sense of rationalist scepticism as regards supposed supernatural wonders (see Lund 1995). Although his tone was more sarcastic and mocking than it was philosophical, some recent Enlightenment studies have underlined the significance of satirical comment “como desahogo intermitente de tensiones vitales de toda índole ... como reproche moral y concienciación social de intenciones transformadoras” (Durán López 2019, 11; see also Phiddian 2019). Like Woolston, Gavín represented an intellectual bridge between Protestant reformist culture and the incipient Enlightenment.¹⁸ His savage historico-literary satirical writings, which reveal his radical opposition to miracle narratives and superstitions, are far more effective than discursive reasoning when it comes to deconstructing claims of sanctity. Enlightenment thinking held that everything relating to the lives of the saints was entirely imaginary (or deliberately faked) – not just the virtues and miracles ascribed to them, but the whole paraphernalia of gesture and ritual, sacred objects, visions, prophecies and so on (see Israel 2001).

The theme of the construction of sanctity, understood as a primarily social and cultural phenomenon, is receiving increasing attention from historians (see, e.g., Burke 1984; Kienzle and Nienhuis 2001; Alabrús Iglesias and Cárcel 2015; Vincent-Cassy and Civil 2019). There is a saying in Spanish that “los santos no nacen, se hacen”, but this needs further clarification – saints do not make themselves, nor are they made by the grace of God. In the words of Pierre Deloof, “one is never a saint except for other people” (1983, 194; emphasis added). And as Anne Schutte has pointed out, many individuals were only seen as holy for a certain amount of time, because everything was dependent on circumstances and the reaction of others: “Sooner or later, by chance or conscious intention to disseminate the good news, a personal quest entered the public domain” (2001, 99).

Picking up Francisca Guerrero’s story where we left off, after she had been denounced by her neighbour, an inquisitor came to the house to verify the true state of affairs. On discovering the dead child, “he then ordered that she and the reverend and all their domestic servants should be secured immediately and lent to the holy inquisition”, events that caused uproar in Zaragoza. Meanwhile, “everything in the house was seized upon”. The most interesting item retrieved from the house was a biography of Guerrero, found among the priest’s papers and “written by Father Navarro’s own hand”. According to Gavín, “the manuscript contained about 600 sheets” and, having examined it, the “qualifiers of the holy office” declared that it was “scandalous, false and against revealed doctrines in the Scripture, and good manners, and that it deserved to be burnt in the common yard of the holy office, by the mean officer of it” (1773, 71–72). The fate of the manuscript remains unknown, but although it has never been found, we do know something of its contents. Together with another one hundred and fifty clerics of the city, Gavín was called to be present at the trial of the penitent and her confessor, and he took it upon himself to summarize the main points, doing so with plenty of irony and disparaging commentary. Francisca’s supposed sanctity was not just cast into doubt but presented as risible. In making his iconoclastic statements, this combative former Catholic priest realized that mockery was the most effective weapon: “Indeed both the Father and the *blessed* appeared that day very much like saints, if we will believe the Roman’s proverb, that paleness and thin visage is a sign of sanctity” (1773, 73).

In line with the stereotypes of orthodox sanctity, Francisca was supposed to have been honoured by the visits of various celestial beings. Not only had angels visited her room on several occasions, she had also been favoured by the presence of all three aspects of the Holy Trinity. Christ, the “divine spouse”, had given her various instructions, including the advice to live apart from her husband, while the Holy Spirit, in the shape of a dove, had sat upon her head many times. She had allegedly been told that her body would remain forever incorruptible and that “a great king, with the news of her death”, would honour her grave with this motto, “The soul of this warrior [guerrero] is the glory of my kingdom”; she would also apparently end up being canonized by the pope (Gavín 1773, 73–74).

One of the qualities commonly associated with female sanctity was an ability to travel into purgatory and communicate with the souls imprisoned there (Zarri 1990; Stanzone 2014). Francisca’s extraordinary biography also contained the claim that she had “taken out of purgatory seven times the soul of his companion’s sister” (Gavín 1773, 73–4).¹⁹ What is most remarkable here, however, is not the list of conventional marvels in itself, but Gavín’s gloss on them. “What folly!” (74), he exclaims, about her supposed journeys into purgatory. His condemnation of claims of any kind of pseudo-miraculous happenings will be echoed in Leandro Fernández de Moratín’s satirical account (published in 1811) of the notorious auto de fé of the witches of Zugarramurdi. Moratín described the accusations of witchcraft as “bárbara, torpe y hedionda estupidez” (as quoted in Fernández Nieto 1989, 181), ridiculing in equal measure the clergy, the devil and his acolytes. Both he and Gavín used wit and vulgarity as tools in their defence of reason and ethics, poking fun at a series of beliefs that both men held to be nothing but trickery, whether attributed to miracles or magic.

Gavín ends his scathing tale by commenting on the claim made in Francisca’s biography that on a certain occasion Christ had appeared to her dressed as a Dominican, “and in a celestial dream she was overshadowed by the spirit”. As he adds rather waspishly,

The truth is, that the *blessed* was not overshadowed by the Spirit, but by her confessor; for she being at that time with child, and delivered in the inquisition, one article against the Father was that he had his bed near her bed, and that he was the father of the new child or monster on earth. (1773, 74)

For Gavín, there could be only two possible reasons for the priest having made, in his words, so gross an error: either he was blinded by lust, or his penitent was skilled in deception. His insistence on Francisca’s duplicity reveals a starkly dichotomous, hierarchical and sexist vision of the world. On the one hand there existed a rational, unselfish form of the religion, inseparable from morality; on the other a superstitious and materialistic religiosity which was almost always associated with women. Basing his argument on a profound rejection of Catholicism, he made the black-and-white distinction between true and false faith. His hard-hitting conclusions do not, however, reflect the reality of the characters who people his story.

The idea that many lay holy women were in fact guilty of consummate hypocrisy became so widely accepted in Spain that the term *beata*, which in theory means “spiritually

happy”, acquired a pejorative meaning, becoming a synonym for a woman who feigned a religiosity she did not really feel. We can see how discrimination against such women persisted even in the late nineteenth century, with an article in the newspaper *El Motín* labelling beatas “mojigatas, crédulas, hipócritas, fanáticas, manipuladoras, cotillas, deslenguadas, etc.” (as quoted in Salomón Chéliz 2011, 71). As noted by María Pilar Salomón Chéliz, “la imagen sexualizada de la beata oscilaba entre dos extremos: o era objeto sexual pasivo del cura, o era una mujer que se tornaba fogosa y ardientemente libidinosa sólo en presencia de figuras clericales” (90).

Broadly speaking, the beata, especially if she were a laywoman – and, therefore, relatively independent – was a figure of contempt, an attitude justified by the assumption that her sanctity was a sham. Women generally were thought to be essentially duplicitous, a belief based on the idea that, given a lack of physical strength and social status, the only weapons they had at their disposal in the battle for power were dishonesty and seduction. As Mónica Bolufer has pointed out, in the eighteenth century there was an abundance of images of hypocritical women, “deseosas de invertir la posición subordinada que les correspondía, mujeres que maquinaban arrebatar el poder a los hombres y eran causa de su ruina” (1998, 62–63).

The accusation of false sanctity levelled against Francisca Guerrero is just one of many such examples to be found in the records of inquisitorial trials brought against women in the Catholic world throughout the early modern period (see Zarri 1991; Rubial García 1997; Jaffary 2004; Bouley 2018), in which gender played a fundamental role (see Weber 1999). To quote Andrew Keitt, “Women were more likely to be charged with feigning raptures and revelations because of ingrained cultural assumptions about female duplicity. Moreover, women were thought to be especially prone to demonic deception for physiological reasons” (2005, 5–6).

If we look beyond Gavín’s misogyny, there are a number of possible interpretations of Francisca’s actions. Avoiding the extreme labels usually applied to women, a measured view would suggest that she was neither the innocent victim of her confessor nor a professional fraudster. As regards the former, Bilinkoff has shown that confessor-penitent relationships were often less coercive and inequitable and more complex, nuanced and reciprocal than one might have expected. Most women were looking not so much for absolution from their sins as for an opportunity to talk in confidence and intimacy with someone of the opposite sex other than their husband. And, in the cases of those considered exceptional for their piety and spiritual gifts, the confessor-penitent relationship was even more balanced and equitable (Bilinkoff 2005, 26).

Such relationships were, then, often mutually beneficial, and this may well have been true, for a while at least, for Francisca Guerrero and Miguel Navarro. While priests might profit from the opportunity provided by a penitent to promote a model of sanctity, the women involved might benefit from the enhanced public image and official recognition implied by their priest’s endorsement. We need to remember that female religious authority was nonexistent in a Church ruled by men. A close bond with one of God’s representatives on earth offered a woman a rare chance of personal advancement. It is significant that, as Gavín suggests, the priest’s lengthy hagiography may have been written collaboratively, or indeed at least in part by Francisca herself. Our knowledge of the true extent of women’s behind-the-scenes influence in such situations is hindered by the ambiguity surrounding the ownership of the narrative voice in accounts of female

sanctity. This area is now beginning to be investigated from fresh perspectives (for example, Weber 1990; Myers 2003).

As for Francisca's supposed duplicity, for which she was eventually denounced to the Inquisition, it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions one way or the other. Looking at her story from a purely rationalist viewpoint, we cannot help but be suspicious about her miracle-working ability. From a cultural or anthropological perspective, however, we know that demonic possession (attributed to other beatas and denounced by Gavín) and miracles alike were part of the religious language relating to health and sickness, whether physical or psychological-spiritual (see Tausiet 2002; Wild 2006). Gavín's account tells us that many sick people came to see Francisca "and some that did happen to go, when nature itself was upon the crisis, or by the exercise of walking, or by some other natural operation, finding themselves better, did use to cry out, a miracle, a miracle!" (1773, 70).

We shall never know whether Francisca truly believed she could help those who came to her, or whether she simply took advantage of the sick and needy for reasons of self-interest. It could well be that, in the same way as other beatas served their communities by doing charitable works (see Weber 2019), Francisca provided comfort to many, through a combination of empathy and, perhaps, some knowledge of healing. What seems undeniable is that, if only for a short while, she was in control of her own fate. In making her choice of confessor, she succeeded in rising above the life allotted to her and challenged the patriarchal conventions surrounding marriage and female submission. Sadly, however, the resistance to authority represented by her ephemeral moment of public sanctity did not end well.

According to a letter dated 2 March 1706, which gives the details of her death and arrangements for her to be buried in the San Gil parish of Zaragoza, Francisca had been imprisoned the previous year "por delictos de ypocrita embustera". During her time in jail she was visited by a doctor several times as a result of "accidentes uterinos". Eight months into a sentence that kept being extended, as she faced an "acusación de más de 400 capítulos, y muy largos" of which "había respondido ya a 337", she was found in her cell "sin sentido ni pulsos ... difunta y yerta" (Inquisición 2337/1, no. 4, fols. 1r-v). Her fate contrasts starkly with that of her confessor, Father Navarro. According to another inquisitorial document, after being imprisoned "por delictos de mala dirección de Francisca Guerrero", in 1708 he was still asking for "más papel y libros para formarse su defensa" (Inquisición 1806, no. 20, fol. 1r). Unlike Francisca, however, he was eventually released from jail and lived on into old age, venerated as a man of learning and wisdom.

Notes

1. Words spoken by a jealous husband to his wife in Luis Buñuel's 1953 film *Él*, based on Mercedes Pinto's 1926 novel of the same title (as quoted in Cummings 2004, 87).
2. In 1559, Pedro Guerrero, archbishop of Granada, suggested that solicitation should come under the jurisdiction of the Spanish Inquisition, given that it implied a mockery of the sacrament of penance and an attack on the Christian faith, which would make it a form of heresy. Inquisitor General Fernando de Valdés agreed and, having obtained authorization from Pius IV, added solicitation to his 1561 Instructions as an area over which the Inquisition would exercise control (Kamen 1997, 267).

3. The trial took place during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), triggered by the death in 1700 of the childless Carlos II of Spain. Although the Spanish Inquisition remained active until 1834, it was in that same year of 1705 that the Zaragoza tribunal had to leave its seat in the Aljafería Palace when invading French troops took up residence there (see Lázaro 1999).
4. The so-called Bull of the Crusade originally granted indulgences to participants in the crusades, with the faithful of Spain and its dominions gaining a plenary indulgence if they either fought in the Holy Land or made a pilgrimage to Rome in a jubilee year, as long as they also went to confession and received Holy Communion. The alms raised by these bulls were initially only used to fund these wars, but as different popes continued to issue them to Spain until well into the nineteenth century, the monies gathered were later used instead for the benefit of the country's churches and clergy (see Goñi Gaztambide 1958).
5. One example of Minerva's ubiquitous symbolic presence in religious discourse of the Enlightenment is Daniel Chodowiecki's 1791 etching "Enlightened Wisdom, in the Form of the Goddess Minerva, Takes the Faithful of All Religions under Her Protection", which appeared in the Goettingen Pocket Calendar for 1792. This was published by influential editor Johann Christian Dietrich (1722–1800), who was also an official bookseller for the Christian multi-confessional Georg-August-University of Göttingen. Representatives of various faiths, including a Muslim, a Jew with a Torah scroll and a Catholic monk, can be seen in the foreground.
6. While this documentation (which would of course be invaluable in either supporting or contradicting Gavín's account) is missing, Madrid's National Historical Archive houses unequivocal evidence about the holding of the inquisitorial trial and its aftermath (Inquisición, 2337/1, no. 4, and 1806, no. 20).
7. Latassa y Otín describes Miguel Navarro y Soria as a "sobresaliente humanista, sabio, filósofo, teólogo y escritor ... de estatura alta y presencia magestuosa y de una gravedad y compostura verdaderamente religiosas", and lists no fewer than fifty-four works written by him (1800, 4:508–518).
8. It is important to note that Francisca's voice remains unheard: her story is mediated by Gavín, whose account can only give his interpretation of her relationship with her confessor.
9. On beatas in early modern Spain, see Sarrión Mora (2003) and Weber (2016).
10. For more on the fine line between the ideas of confessor as "spiritual father" and "spiritual husband", see Lavrin (2008).
11. "Todas las almas verdaderamente virtuosas aun el mayor bullicio del siglo, han mantenido dentro de sí un recogimiento místico y una *soledad prodigiosa*" (Orellana 1887, 19).
12. Don Antonio Ibáñez de la Riva was archbishop of Zaragoza between 1687 and 1710. The viceroy, or king's representative in Aragón, was, until 1702, the Marquis of Camarasa, Baltasar Gómez Manrique de Mendoza de los Cobos y Luna. He was succeeded by Ibáñez de la Riva.
13. "La idea de las mujeres como seres extremos, entre sublimes y peligrosos, se apoyaba en las explicaciones fisiológicas de la sensibilidad que ... se divulgaron desde la literatura científica a la opinión ilustrada" (Bolufer 1998, 279).
14. Shakespeare alludes to this idea in *All's Well That Ends Well* (II, iii, 1–6) and the axiom "Miracles are ceast" is reiterated (albeit anachronistically) by the Archbishop of Canterbury in *Henry V* (I, i, 68–70).
15. "In other words, such occurrences only appeared miraculous in the eye of the beholder: their actual 'natural' causes remained cloaked and hidden from the view of imperfect human beings" (Walsham 2005, 285).
16. This was the thesis defended by Max Weber in his celebrated book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in English in 1930.
17. Those who denounced what they considered to be false miracles in England in the seventeenth century include Samuel Harsnett, Richard Sheldon, John Gee, Thomas Becon and William Waller. For more on Spanish converts in England, see Amelang (2013).
18. Gavín's life, work and ideology represent a clear link between the Reformation and the Enlightenment. His ethic of personal responsibility led him to abandon his religion and his country, in search of congruence. Thereafter he battled – in word and deed – against all

forms of abuse practised by the Catholic Church, as well as against all forms of irrationality and superstition.

19. The fact that some people continued to believe, throughout the eighteenth century, that beatas had dealings with souls in purgatory can also be seen in the record of the inquisitorial trial of María de Yela, 1784–1786 (Inquisición, 97, no. 15, fols. 19r–v.).

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