

**Dulcinea, Our Lady of La Mancha: Speculating on Cervantes' Devotion to the
Cult of the Immaculate Conception**

Mirzam Cristina Handal

Tulane University

Since the arrival of the first Habsburg monarch in 1518, Spain held on to the cult of the Virgin Mary, in particular to the conviction of Mary's Immaculate Conception, as a means of preserving the country's pious glory in the face of advancing Protestantism in Europe. Although Spain had pretty much been spared from the actual incursion of religious reformation due to its geographical isolation from the rest Europe, the Spanish Habsburgs were much too aware of the plight of their German relatives and were focused in protecting and preserving Spain from the impending ideological epidemic. Though generally known for their political tactics of favoring neighborly allegiances, strategic marriages to other vital kingdoms, and a stratagem of government by consensus, the Spanish Habsburg found in the Mary cult yet another effective means to achieve its most urgent dynastic objectives of securing territories and control, both physically and ideologically.

Miguel de Cervantes' work provides invaluable insight into the importance of this popular cult and the construction of the Virgin Mary as a divine axis of political and religious power. Mary and the cult of the Immaculate Conception, specifically, would become essential to the Habsburg agenda of sustaining a Catholic empire.

The popular devotion to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary was a topic of ardent controversy, and not yet endorsed by the Pope. It supported the idea that not only Jesus was born by the grace of the Holy Ghost, but that the Virgin Mary herself was also devoid of original sin at the time of her own conception. Mary had God's special and inexplicable

dispensation. The feast of the conception of Mary, closely associated with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, was already celebrated in parts of Europe from the twelfth century on. It became a commonplace observance towards the late fourteenth century. By the end of the fifteenth century both the doctrine and the feast were generally accepted in the western Catholic Church. (Pelikan 189-200)

Despite its popular reception with the people, the doctrine itself was a source of heated controversy as Rome had not approved it as dogma. Theologians had argued for centuries without agreement about the plausibility of such a miracle. Some, like the Franciscan Duns Scotus (d. 1308) eloquently defended Mary's preservation from sin. Others, like Bernard de Clairvaux (1090-1153) opposed the possibility of Mary being conceived without sin arguing that her lack of need of redemption demeaned the saving work of Christ. (Spivey 53-54) The religious orders were, as a consequence, divided into two factions: *immaculistas/ without stain* and *maculistas/ stained*. The Franciscan and Jesuit orders sided with the monarchy in its public devotion while the Dominicans persistently denied any possibility of Mary's purity and favored instead the daily prayer of the Rosary. The convents were convoluted and divided in their beliefs as well. This division within the ranks of the Church contributed to the Pope's ambivalence with the decision regarding the dogma. Meanwhile, in the courts and the streets of Spain, the ongoing debate gave impetus to a national crusade sustained through the years and enthusiastically endorsed by Felipe III's monarchy as at the time *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha* was written in 1605.

This work attempts to explore how writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra represents the protagonist's interaction with his idealized lady in waiting, Dulcinea. Cervantes invites the reader to associate Don Quixote's staunch following of his Dulcinea with the same devotion, cult

Sin Frontera 3 (Mayo 2008)

and religious fervor bestowed upon the Virgin Mary, prototype of the ideal woman in the Catholic world of 17th Century Habsburg Spain. Marian ideology of the Immaculate Conception develops into a source of piety and national identification for the Habsburg monarchs in Spain. It becomes a way for aspiring noblemen and artistic celebrities to align themselves with the ruling class and promote artistic following of their own works of art. Literature enabled the portrayal of this unresolved religious conviction, serving Cervantes to establish favorable ties with the dominant political establishment. This willingness to align with the ruling class would not necessarily be one imposed or coerced by the state. Frank Casa asserts that the Spanish baroque value rested primarily on society, not on the individual. Authors, independent of their personal views, would feel obliged to defend the prevalent mores of their society. Writers, like Miguel de Cervantes, were influenced by their immediate cultural context. They were not intentionally directed by the state into taking a certain stance, although direct criticism of the government would definitely incite censorship. (67) By including in his novel the burgeoning following of the Immaculate Conception, Cervantes becomes an innovative leader of a religious movement that would forever link the arts to the national and religious identity of Spain.

The resolve of the Habsburg court to advocate the cult of the Immaculate Conception was manifested in their public and private behavior. Felipe III had organized a *Real Junta*, or Royal Council, dedicated exclusively to promoting the Immaculate Conception of Mary. These councils were part of the bureaucratic machine established by his father, Felipe II and continued by Felipe III's establishment at the start of the seventeenth century. They consisted of ten to twelve men recruited from the nobility or among graduates of the University of Salamanca (*letrados*) who would discuss topics of political relevance and give the King their final approval or rejection for his consideration. However, Felipe III's objective with this particular council was

for his diplomats to pressure the Pope towards proclaiming the cult of the Immaculate Conception official Catholic dogma.

Besides direct political action, the Habsburg monarch and his family also supported the cult of the Immaculate Conception through personal example. According to art historian Susan Stratton, the Habsburg dynasty displayed its piety in Marian sanctuaries. Through pilgrimages, feasts and celebrations the Habsburgs sought the Virgin Mary as a unifying national symbol as well as a source of protection for their government. (89) Habsburg kings and their queens alike promoted the veneration of the “*santísima*,”/ the saintliest in an attempt to secure her divine protection in political, military and personal affairs. Securing Mary’s intercession was of central importance and involved devotional practices of pilgrimage, veneration of images, processions, litanies, antiphons, and membership in confraternities. Spanish leaders established an observable and traceable link between the welfare of the state, the country and the people as embodied in the image of Mary. Jeffrey Schraeder’s art historical research also sheds light on this intimate link between the Marian cult and the Habsburg political and personal agenda. He establishes how the court appropriated the cult of miraculous images to construct a sense of dynastic continuity, national territory, and an ideologically unified military. (49-51) When the court was eventually established on Madrid in 1561, the Marian cult grew exponentially at all levels of Castilian society. The Virgin Mary, in the particular representation of the Immaculate Conception, became an icon, a visual emblem, identifying the Habsburgs. (Pelikan 194)

With time, iconographic representations of the Immaculate Conception permeated Spanish society. In an attempt to win the approval of the ruling class, artists and writers began to execute interpretations of this version of the Virgin. The visual cues of the Immaculate Mary originated in a verse in the New Testament, Rev. 12:1. This verse describes an apocalyptic

woman dressed as the sun, standing over the moon, crowned by the stars, that battles the dragon of sin as it attempts to devour her child. This strong, heroic woman has been interpreted and painted as Virgin Mary who steps on the head of a dragon. This dragon is the devil who seeks to destroy her child, baby Jesus. Her purity makes her invincible in her struggle against the forces of evil. Her dainty foot is shown to peek from under her robe to smash effortlessly the head of this demon. (Warner 153) This iconography along with an abbreviated version showing Mary with only a sickle moon became very common on Germany from the mid fifteenth century onwards and spread through in Europe with the Marian devout. As a visual representation, it became an adequate medium to illustrate the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception where Mary is predestined before the creation of the world to be the mother of Christ and as such, be untouched by original sin. (Heal 31)

Cervantes attempts to join the ongoing cultural dialogue of the Immaculate Conception by sketching his Dulcinea as a deified Virgin Mary, an image of Don Quixote's imagination and devout following. David Quint has commented on this 'idoltrous cult of Dulcinea.' He supports that it functions exclusively for Don Quixote's self esteem. The protagonist worships himself through his idol and creation, Dulcinea. (86-90)

On the other hand, Michael Carroll explains that fervent devotion to the Virgin Mary is a practice that allows sex repressed males, Don Quixote in this case, to dissipate tension in an acceptable manner. (86) I wish to go beyond their contributions.

I propose that the inclusion of the cult of the Immaculate Conception becomes a powerful mechanism for Cervantes to align with the ruling class. His enthusiasm for the King's focus of piety promotes artistic following of his works through the Dulcinea-Virgin Mary connection. According to Melveena McKendrick nearly all great Spanish literary figures of the 17th century

Sin Frontera 3 (Mayo 2008)

had close connections with the Church. The Catholic Church was a “great career structure” where religious and secular life was truly indivisible. Cervantes himself was a very devout man and, in 1609, joined the religious brotherhood The Confraternity of Slaves of the Most Blessed Sacrament. (261) Membership in these religious and social clubs, also favored by outstanding writers like Quevedo, Lope, and Tirso, encouraged the favoritism of King Felipe III and his political favorite, the Duque of Lerma. By endorsing the personal project of the Habsburg King, the approval of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Cervantes begins a literary and religious campaign to promote his writings through the Dulcinea-Virgin Mary deification.

Don Quixote points to the significance of Dulcinea when he states, “a knight errant without a lady-love is a tree without leaves or fruit, a body without soul” (29) Having then chosen his weapons and an appropriate name for his steed, he searches for a “lady of his thoughts” to bring to fruition his chivalric reality. He yanks from the ribs of his imagination the one who would become the “mistress of his hapless heart”: Aldonza Lorenzo. Even though he knows her vaguely and, quite frankly, she is not the beautiful and immaculate woman imagined by our hero, Don Quixote adopts the “good-looking peasant girl” as his true object of devotion and love. She is to function as an object of pilgrimage not only for Don Quixote, but also to those whom he vanquishes. In order to complete the final step of his self creation into a knight errant, Don Quixote must re-baptize his lady and princess as Dulcinea del Toboso.

Dulcinea’s name is significant as it is derived from the root of the Latin noun *dulcedo* which means sweetness in the general sense, and graciousness and beatitude in the moral sense. Iventosch claims that the adjective *dulce* was applied during the Middle Ages almost exclusively to Jesus and Mary. Only with Dante and Petrarch does it acquire secular use. In Spain, however, the adjective retained its religious connotations until the Renaissance was well advanced (72-76).

This definition would definitely support the religious basis of Don Quixote's baptism and devotion to Dulcinea. (Herrero 37)

Our knight's public devotion begins in Chapter III where he offers himself to Dulcinea. He asks for her divine protection. Lifting his eyes to the heavens he seeks the image of this ideal woman in his imagination as if he were imploring the virgin herself. With reverence, he solicits her defense in the adventure in which he is about to embark. To him, she is no less than his personal goddess to guide him in his journey.

In order to further emphasize his personal relationship with this guiding force, Don Quixote addresses Dulcinea with the title "our lady," a formal denomination used exclusively for Marian images. The title "our lady" was the first feudal title bestowed upon the Virgin and popularized in Europe in the 13th and 14th century. According to Warner, this title becomes the most personal avocation of the Virgin. (153) I believe it allows Don Quixote's act to take linguistic possession and raise Dulcinea to the status of a deity as if proving to himself: 'She is mine and she is my goddess'.

Don Quixote confers the success of his first battle to his Virgin, not Mary as expected, but rather Dulcinea. He asks her that "no me desfallezca vuestro favor y amparo"/ may you favor and protection never fail me" pleading anxiously for the blessing of his powerful heavenly goddess. (64)

Don Quixote's allegiance surfaces again when he encounters the Toledo merchants in Chapter IV. The knight is not satisfied with believing in Dulcinea. He demands that others, too, accept Dulcinea as the most beautiful and noble of all maidens. He mandates conversion and confession. In terms similar to the *Requerimiento*, a statement implemented in 1513 by the Spanish crown to justify the right to take possession of the territories of the New World and Sin Frontera 3 (Mayo 2008)

subjugate the indigenous populations, Don Quixote demands acquiescence and conversion to his faith. Just as the Spanish conquistadores viewed those who resisted conquest as beings harboring evil intentions and needing divine redemption, so too does Don Quixote force acceptance, not of the Catholic faith, but of his Virgin Dulcinea. The merchants do not acquiesce so readily. They require proof. They ask to see a portrait of this beautiful lady, proving that, in early modern Spain, faith and belief go hand in hand with the visual adoration of religious images. Don Quixote insists that it is not necessary to see in order to believe. Truth, he insists, is enough for faith to establish itself. As with the ongoing societal preoccupation over the Immaculate Conception, faith remains the determining factor in accepting a principle of religious belief.

In chapter XXXI Cervantes chooses specific vocabulary to support Don Quixote's belief system. This establishes the writer as an innovator in immaculate semiotics. The choice of words is evidenced when Sancho Panza returns from *supposedly* delivering Don Quixote's letter to Dulcinea. Two made up realities superimpose each other: one created by Sancho and the other by our knight. Unfortunately, both are equally fictitious. The ethereal portrayal of Dulcinea in the words of Don Quixote is contrasted with the more pragmatic, unglamorous presentation of the rustic Aldonza.

While Sancho describes Dulcinea harvesting wheat in the farm, Don Quixote composes her with metaphors associated with the Virgin Mary. He imagines Dulcinea making pearl necklaces. Curiously, the pearl is a gem associated with virginal qualities and is abundantly used in the clothes and portraits of virgin queens. (Bernis 45) Don Quixote also compares her to roses and lilies, flowers that painters of the Immaculate Conception, like Zurbaran and Murillo, will in future decades reserve for visual depictions of Mary's purity.

Mary's purity is juxtaposed to the common woman's impurity. Part 1 of the Quixote ends with a most controversial case of mistaken identities. Don Quixote confuses a group of disciplinants carrying an image of the Virgin Mary. He is convinced they are holding a noble lady captive. He bravely decides to avenge her honor. Trying to liberate her, he attacks the pilgrims. This assault on ecclesiastical figures and the actual statue of the Virgin Mary has been interpreted by Quint as an example of Don Quixote's "anarchic and antisocial" behavior (Quint 86). Yet this interpretation fails to acknowledge the humor behind it. Rather, I endorse the opinion that humor functions in this situation as a liberating force. As Carroll states "humor may be a form of religiousness, even a more advanced form of male religiousness than that based on honor and hope." (53)

Also relevant is Henry Sullivan's interpretation of this complex episode. To him, Cervantes is creating a religious triptych, a tri-partite *retablo* with the scene. One section of this altar speaks of the stained, sexual nature of woman. This female representation stems from Eve's disobedience and the resulting expulsion of Eve and Adam from the Garden of Eden. Woman is perceived as the source of evil, sin and condemnation to all humankind.

The opposite panel refers to the utmost example of womankind to be found, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, or perhaps, Dulcinea in Don Quixote's reality. The stain of Eve's sinfulness is juxtaposed to the purity and lack of sin, both physically and mentally, of the Mother of Jesus. The left and right panels work in conjunction to promote contemplation on the extremely polarized perception of woman as being either an all evil or an all perfect being. The impossible expectations exerted on womankind by an intolerant society are contrasted with a more realistic visualization of woman. The center of the triptych is reserved for Leandra, the common everyday

woman. Neither perfect nor evil, she is a combination of virtues and vices. She is victimized by man and is completely at odds in a no-win situation of impossible masculine expectations.

Departing from the text and focusing a bit on the life of Cervantes there is abundant evidence of his religious zeal towards the Virgin Mary. For one, Cervantes was especially devoted to the Virgin and wrote odes in her honor during his captivity in Algiers. As he approached old age he felt compelled to get closer to the Church and in 1613 received the habit of the 3rd Order of St. Frances, the Franciscan Tertiaries. (Mckendrick 282) This order, not surprising, had ardently defended the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception against the attacks of the Dominicans, the order that publicly opposed the concept of Mary's purity. Cervantes chose intentionally an order that closely resembled his theological passions on this most salient debate.

The most convincing archival evidence for Cervantes' piety to the Virgin comes from the work of Leticia Arbeteta. Based on her archival research at different Spanish monasteries, she points to the popularized custom among monarchs, court members and even celebrities to donate jewels, *exvotos*, to the various Marian images in appreciation for the Virgin's mercy. Of particular relevance are the archives of the Monastery of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain. Its inventories have various entries for jewel donations from Miguel de Cervantes, Santa Teresa de Jesus and San Juan de Dios among other celebrities of the day. (97-103) Arbeteta's research points to the intimate relationship between personal devotion of the Mary cult and the focus of the literary projects in which these writers were involved.

With this exploration of the Virgin- Dulcinea connection I have invited you to speculate on Miguel de Cervantes' endorsement of the cult of the Immaculate Conception as evidenced through his depiction of Dulcinea in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. As an active, vibrant religious

current identifying Habsburg Spain and early modern Catholicism, the zeal of the Immaculate Conception of Mary served to encourage the Mary cult while limiting the encroachment of the Protestant reformation.

Cervantes' commitment to Felipe III's regime and the Catholic Church, serves to remind us of the binding and indissoluble relationship between art, literature and government in 17th century Spain.

* Mirzam Cristina Handal is a PhD candidate at Tulane University.

Works Cited

Arbeteta Mira, Leticia. "El alhajamiento de las imagenes marianas espanolas: los joyeros de Guadalupe de Caceres y el Pilar de Zaragoza" Revista de dialectologia y tradiciones populares. 51.2 (1996) 97-107.

Bernis, Carmen. El traje y los tipos sociales en El Quijote. Madrid: El Viso, 2001.

Capps, Donald. Men and their Religion: Honor, Hope and Humor. Harrisburg,PA:Trinity Press International, 2002.

Carroll, Michael P. The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986

Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de. The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha. Trans. John Rutherford. New York: Penguin, 2001.

Heal, Bridget. The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500-1649. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.

Herrera Javier S. "Dulcinea and Her Critics." Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America 2.1(1982):23-42.

Iventosch, Herman. "Dulcinea, nombre pastoral." Revista de Filologia Hispanica. 17(1966):60-81. *Nueva*

Johnson, Carroll B. Madness and Lust: A Psychoanalytical Approach to Don Quijote. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983.

McKendrick, Melveena. Cervantes. Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1980.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.

Quint, David. Cervantes' Novel of Modern Times: A New Reading of Don Quijote. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.

Schrader, Jeffrey. La Virgen de Atocha: Los Austrias y las imagenes milagrosas. Madrid: Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2006.

Spivey Ellington, Donna. From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Washington, DC: Catholic U. of America P, 2001.

Sin Frontera 3 (Mayo 2008)

Sullivan, Henry. Class reading and discussion of Don Quixote. Tulane University, New Orleans. October 2006.

Stratton, Suzanne L. The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Warner, Maria. Alone in All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary. New York, 1983.