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## A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP: MARCELA DE SAN FÉLIX AND LOPE DE VEGA

### RESUMEN

Sor Marcela de san Félix, hija de Lope de Vega, profesó votos religiosos en la Orden de las Trinitarias Descalzas de Madrid a los 16 años. Heredó talento literario de su padre y escribió dramas alegóricos y poesías religiosas. Este artículo se enfoca en la relación compleja entre padre e hija, basada en ejemplos de sus obras y con información adicional en la vida escrita por sus hermanas después de su muerte. Exploro tres áreas de su relación: admiración de Marcela por el talento de Lope, junto con disgusto por su manera inmoral de vivir, finalmente indicios de un afecto mutuo entre ellos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Sor Marcela de san Félix—Lope de Vega—dramas alegóricos—siglo 17—monjas—España—escritoras españolas

### ABSTRACT

Sor Marcela de San Félix, daughter of Lope de Vega, professed as a Discalced Trinitarian nun in the Madrid convent of San Ildefonso at the age of 16. Inheriting the literary talent of her father, she wrote sacred dramatic allegories and composed poetry. This article focusses on the complex relationship between Marcela and Lope as evident in her literary work and in information contained in the biography written by her Trinitarian sisters after her death. I explore three areas of their relationship: Marcela's admiration for Lope's talent, her disapproval of his immoral life, and some signs of mutual affection.

**KEYWORDS:** Sor Marcela de San Félix—Lope de Vega—seventeenth-century allegorical drama—nuns—Spain—women writers

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In a well-written work of fiction, be it a novel, poetry, or drama, the reader enjoys the beauty of expression and experiences an appreciation for the intellect that produced it. For scholars who take pleasure in reading fiction, it does not suffice simply to read a book, or a poem, or a play. Behind the work lies a back story of the author's life experiences and world view. For me, the thrill of discovery through critical analysis of the written word lies in uncovering hidden clues about the life of the author that enrich the reading. For this present study, I offer my thoughts on the conflicted emotions of Sor Marcela, Discalced Trinitarian nun, toward her famous father, Lope de Vega. Seen through the lens of Marcela's sacred allegorical dramas and religious poetry, together with anecdotes in the biography written by her Trinitarian sisters after her death, it is possible to discern much about this emotionally complicated relationship.

Before moving into my analysis however, I offer a brief review of Lope's adult life and loves as background to Marcela's experience from her birth to the eight years she lived in his Madrid household. While all names, dates, and ages of his offspring would be difficult to confirm, from the writings of various Lope biographers all agree that he had two wives, Isabel de Urbina and Juana de Guardo. Lope's first two daughters with Isabel died in infancy and she died shortly after the second birth. Of the daughter and son born to his second wife, Jacinta died at two or three years old and his first son, Carlos Félix died at age six. The last legitimate daughter, Feliciana, born in 1613, was the only one to live to adulthood, to marry, and to be present at his death (Ramón-Laca 86-88). Reports vary for the number of mistresses from seven to eleven women, with agreement for at least seven illegitimate children. Among them were Marcela and Lope Félix with three other children: Angela, Jacinta and Juan, born to Micaela de Luján and acknowledged by Lope as his. Sor Marcela's biographers note discretely that Fray Luis de la Madre de Dios, a Discalced Trinitarian, was a close blood relative (Smith 2001: 59). Another illegitimate son, Fernando Pellicer, took the name of Fray Vicente in the Franciscan Order. Pellicer was born in Valencia in 1599 as the result of Lope's brief affair with an unidentified woman (Hayes 133).

What little can be known about Marcela de Carpio's early years, sheds light on relevant periods of time between her birth and age sixteen. She was born and baptized in Toledo in May of 1605. Her baptismal certificate states that she was "of unknown parents." Nevertheless, the parentage was well-known among the acquaintances of Lope and his mistress, Micaela. José de Valdivielso, a writer of religious allegorical plays and friend of Lope, served as her godfather. The illegitimate birth automatically established societal barriers as the circumstances of her birth did not allow much choice—if not marriage, then the convent. With Lope's larger-than-life fame, she might have married, but becoming a nun was an obvious choice and one she eagerly embraced. In her biography, the sisters record her remark that she "had a greater role in the convent than in the outside world where she was without value and not worthy to be looked in the face" (Smith 2001: 74).

When Marcela was but a few months old, in August of 1605, Lope left Toledo to return to Madrid. By mid-1606 Micaela was living in Madrid with Lope and gave birth to Lope Félix on January 28, 1607. His baptism ten days later took place in Madrid with the baptismal certificate openly naming the parents as Lope de Vega and Micaela de Luján. Perhaps the parents were identified since the paternity was evident from the child's name. But where was Marcela? At not yet two years old, she perhaps stayed in Toledo with the housekeeper, Catalina, as mentioned by several Lope biographers (Castro 106). Within a year of Lope Félix's birth, Micaela disappeared from the historical record, whether by death or simply a parting of the ways remains a mystery. Whatever the case, Marcela at age three and her younger brother about one year old lost their mother and had little or no knowledge of their father. The children may have remained in Toledo with the aforementioned housekeeper, Catalina. One must wonder if Marcela missed her mother or even remembered her. The amorous relationship between Lope and Micaela from 1599 to 1608 falls within the years of Lope's marriage to Juana de Guardo (1598 to 1613). To confuse relations further, in 1604 Lope went to Toledo with both women and set up two households, which he maintained for several years (Hayes 30). He returned to Madrid with Juana in 1610 and she died in August of 1613, after giving birth to their daughter, Feliciana. Both Marcela and Lope Félix were then brought from Toledo to Madrid to live with Lope at his house on Francos Street. Of note, these two children were the only two of Lope's many previous illegitimate children to live with him. Marcela and her younger brother shared the house with their infant half-sister, Feliciana. In 1617, they were joined by another half-sister, Antonia Clara, daughter of Lope and his final mistress, Marta de Nevaes.

Marcela then lived with her father from eight years of age until she entered the convent at sixteen. Her experiences during those years, without a doubt, weighed heavily toward her choice of a religious vocation. Shortly after her arrival in Madrid, Lope took Marcela to visit Fray Tomás de la Virgen for a blessing. Her older half-brother, Fray Luis de la Madre de Dios, witnessed the event. From Marcela's biography we learn that Fray Tomás declared she would be a great Trinitarian (Smith 2001: 59). This visit may well have occurred in 1614, the year Lope took vows as a priest, supposedly in repentance for his many sins. Yet even on the day of his ordination before the Bishop of Toledo, he returned to the house of actress Jerónima de Burgos and they continued an affair begun the previous year. In fact, Lope exercised his role as priest until his death while enjoying three liaisons beginning with Jerónima, followed in 1616 by another actress, Lucía de Salcedo, and finally his long-term commitment to Marta de Nevaes from 1617 until her death in 1632.

Between the ages of eight and sixteen, Marcela not only lived in a crowded and unorthodox household with various half-siblings, she also witnessed her father's

sacrilegious affairs continuing despite his attempt at repentance. As early as age twelve, Marcela was pressed into service to make copies of her father's love letters to Marta de Nevares. Lope's aristocratic patron, the young Duke of Sessa, admirer of the famous playwright's amorous skills had requested copies of letters. Marcela was sent to Marta's home to retrieve the letters and to copy them for the Duke (Marín 197-214). As one reads Marcela's biography, her own words express the clear relief she felt at escaping Lope's house four years later. She told her Trinitarian sisters she "became a nun so she would not get lost in the world [. . .] and fled from its troubles as a delinquent flees from justice" (Smith 2001: 74). Her novice year with the Discalced Trinitarians began at age sixteen when she entered the convent of San Ildefonso on February 28, 1621. The move from Lope's house on Francos Street to the cloister on Cantarranas Street, just a few blocks away, was a world removed from her life up to that time.

These details about Lope's life and Marcela's early years, provide the background for my analysis of her plays and poetry. Her talent for writing dramas and composing poetry surely derives naturally from her education with her father and his many acquaintances from the world of literature and performance. She displays meticulous attention to plotting and choice of characters in her allegories in order to entertain her audience even as she offers lessons in virtue, gently reminding them of their vocational requirements. The word play, double meanings and in-house jokes add to the enjoyment. Sor Marcela wrote four allegorical morality plays and three mystery plays celebrating the festivals of Christmas, Epiphany and Corpus Christi. Not only the playwright however, she also took a role in the cast of each play and often performed as solo prologue speaker. The scripts she wrote, the roles she chose for herself, and the manner of delivery of the prologue lines offer insights into the relationship with her father. Various layers of meaning inherent in allegory open the plays to opportunities for interpretation, to see beneath the words and actions to her deep-seated emotions. Sor Marcela's poetry, written in various poetic forms, covers a number of themes, some serious and others playful. In two poems on the theme of solitude, she speaks eloquently of her gratitude for the peace and quiet of the cloister. She describes the contentment and joy of the opportunity for private communication with God, leaving behind the chaos of her life in the world.

Studying the morality plays and the poems on solitude against the backdrop of Marcela's young life, I explore three areas of her mixed emotions about her father. First, in the prologues that precede her colloquies she suggests admiration for his literary talent and fame as she includes Lope's name or an allusion to him a number of times acknowledging her relationship with him and the talent she has inherited. Second, within two early plays Marcela also voices her disapproval of Lope's moral weaknesses in veiled, albeit clear, references as she takes advantage of the battle of words between allegorical Vices and Virtues in the development of the plots. Finally, I turn to the question of love, or at

least affection, between father and daughter as seen in the written word of each and in their actions toward each other.

Sor Marcela begins her morality plays with a customary prologue in verse for the purpose of greeting the audience and entertaining them with a humorous story. The convent's location in the section of Madrid called "Neighborhood of the Muses," included homes of writers, poets, and actors. Among Marcela's sisters in the convent, many were familiar with the life of the theater and therefore knew her father, his fame and his reputation. For the same reason they were able to recognize and enjoy her talent. References to Lope appear in prologues #8, #11, and #14 (Arenal and Sabat-Rivers 361-415), either directly by name, or by indirect reference calling attention to events in his life and to her relationship with him. In the example of prologue #8, Marcela plays the role of a male university graduate who appears at the convent during the celebration of a profession. He asks the sisters to have pity on him and share some food. The young man quotes Marcela, saying, "I have a little play prepared / to entertain the mothers / but it lacks a prologue" (105-07). She then asks him to write one, giving him a few pointers on what to include. The young man complains that she warns him it must be "so perfect that Lope de Vega could not do any better" (193-95). In his distress, he says to the audience he does not even know the nymphs called Muses who inspire poets and appeals to them for help so that he can receive his supper. In the end, he gives up and asks the nuns to tell the terrible Marcela, should she appear, that they enjoyed the non-existent prologue so he will be allowed to eat. Marcela, of course, has written the lines and delivers them as well. The self-reference humbly and humorously acknowledges her dramatic skill, Lope's fame as a poet, and the family connection.

Prologue #11, similarly written for the celebration of a profession, features a poet who offers to provide a prologue for the colloquy, again with the expectation of sharing in the food prepared for the occasion. He offers his credentials, saying, "Although you see me in rags, / I have a bit of the poet in me / and I consider myself a disciple / of that prolific Vega" (109-112). Marcela's conflicting emotions about her relationship with Lope clearly show in these lines. She acknowledges her father's financial struggles and his need for the support of the Duke of Sessa. The following self-referential line humbly mentions her inherited talent, calling herself a faithful follower of the prolific Lope. Whether Marcela chose the adjective "prolific" as a reference to the vast number of his plays and poems, or a reference to the number of children he fathered, we cannot know. I prefer to think she wanted to indicate both and that she knew her audience would understand and enjoy the double meaning.

The would-be poet in prologue #14 begins with a comical, flowery salutation for the audience in order to gain their favor: "Most wise senate, / holy and beautiful women, / nun-seraphims all of you / in ardor and in purity" (1-4). In exaggeratedly pompous style, he praises the nuns

as he highlights his knowledge of courtly expression in the first-line superlative, his erudition with the Latinate *dóminas* in the second line, and his poetic bent with the invented phrase nun-seraphims all. He then identifies himself as a poor student intending to be a poet, a talent that he has by inheritance, “like father, like son, etc.” (13). Although not naming her father directly, the sisters clearly know the parent/child relationship. I can easily visualize Marcela speaking that last line with a shrug of the shoulders and a small smile.

The prologue poems that introduce the colloquies contain considerable humor as befits the function of relaxing the audience in preparation for the performance. Sor Marcela entertains the sisters with self-reference and in-house jokes. By contrast, the more serious content of the dramatic plots, while still including humorous moments, focuses on teaching and supporting the sisters in their religious vocations. The positive characters represent Virtues who instruct the protagonist, Alma, a generic novice whom I call Everynun. They remind her and the audience of the importance of prayer, the requirements for mortification and austerity, the value of peace and quiet for practicing devotional exercises, and the need to recognize the danger in allowing the negative characters representing Vices to slip into the convent community. Turning from the prologues to the plots of two plays, Sor Marcela shows distress over and condemnation of Lope’s profligate life through the debates between the Virtues and the Vices, ending each plot with the death or expulsion of the dangerous antagonists.

Within the two colloquies, *Death of Desire* and *Esteem for a Religious Order*, censure for Lope’s way of life hides behind the veil of allegory. However, even without directly naming him, given Lope’s fame, the connections of Marcela’s sisters to the world of theater, and the close sisterhood of the convent, no one could miss the intent of the playwright. Sor Marcela has no hesitation about including characters apropos of Lope’s life, portrayed by vices named Desire and the duo of Falsehood/World. Their lines of self-incrimination highlight particular moral failings of her father. The character Desire ironically voices disapproval of Lope’s uncontrolled physical impulses. The foil to Desire, Mortification teaches Alma why it is important to control bodily needs and avoid giving in to his invitations to overindulge the senses. In the play with Falsehood and World as the tempters, Alma must in the end make the decision of whether to take vows or to allow herself to be enticed back into the world. Falsehood acts as go-between for World attempting to lure Alma away from the convent by praising the wealth and comfort World can provide. Marcela’s father, even after having taken priestly vows some years before the writing of this drama, most certainly remained a man of passions who could not resist the world’s temptations.

These two plays share a basic plot conflict of the popular theater in the theme of “the lady and the suitor,” with a rival for the lady’s affections. Alma first learns to practice

mortification through penitence, prayer, and austerity. At the end of her novice year in the second play, she then claims Christ as her true husband, professing her love for him and choosing the Trinitarian Order as her home. I would suggest that these two plays are fresh in Marcela's memory of her father as a man of the world with unrestrained desires. Sexual desires may come to mind first, but he also was ambitious, in constant need of money, and unsuccessfully sought patronage at court. Melveena McKendrick affirms in her study of major seventeenth-century Spanish dramatists that although Lope was acknowledged as a genius, he never received the social status he sought in the world of the aristocracy and never became a court dramatist (85). In specific examples from these two plays, we find that Sor Marcela puts words of self-criticism into the mouths of the Vices. Desire boasts to Alma, "What can I do, am I not a real man? / I am never satisfied / my desires consume me" (Smith 2006: 96-98). The words literally define the sin of uncontrolled passions such as gluttony and lust. Within the plot, Desire plays out the sin of gluttony with many requests to Alma for specific delicacies. He also represents the sin of lust when he claims, "I fill my saddlebag with all / with a secular woman / with a nun, / but the latter pleases me more" (583-85). Desire's words tell us that causing a nun to sin gives him more pleasure than leading astray a secular woman. A fascinating historical note to these lines may have been inspired by the memory of one of Lope's letters to Marta de Nevaes. Between late spring and early fall of 1617, Lope wrote three letters to the Duke assuring him that Marcela had been sent to retrieve his letters and copy them, adding that none would be lost (Marín 197-214). Could one of those letters be the one in which the besotted Lope wrote that he "loved her like a nun?" (Hayes 35). Late in the same play, Desire complains to Mortification: "By chance, am I a friar / that I have to maintain moderation?" (1441-42). Well, yes, of course he is, and he furthermore says Mass at the convent as all the actors and spectators know. Sor Marcela chose the role of Desire for herself so that she delivers the ironic lines of self-incrimination. Thus, she doubles the criticism of Desire when beneath the costume it is Lope's daughter who calls attention to her father's sacrilegious, late love affairs of which she was a witness.

The roles of Falsehood and World in the play *Esteem for a Religious Order* present Alma with a closely-linked pair of antagonists who must be overcome for Alma's profession of holy vows. Falsehood acts as a go-between, boon companion of World, to seduce Alma away from the convent by offering the possibility of wealth, fine clothes, and luxurious carriages. Again, Marcela has written the lines and chosen the role of Falsehood for herself. This character encourages Alma to meet with World, saying, "He is an important man / who is a good friend of my father / and always at my house" (704-06). It is Marcela's voice announcing the criticism of Lope's worldly ambitions. At the climax of the play, Alma rejects the invitation of World and chooses instead to profess vows and join the Order of the Discalced Trinitarians of Madrid, leaving her father's world behind. Her decision to join their Order surely evoked generous applause from the audience of her sisters.

In reading the biography prepared by Marcela's sisters, we also find several examples of her displeasure with her father in his remarks to her of a worldly nature. Even while a novice of sixteen, he told her "it was a shame that she would be a nun having left in Madrid so many suitors who admired her beauty." Marcela answered him that "if he wanted to continue to talk with her, he should not say such silly things. His words offended her and would not sound good to the ears of her husband, Jesus Christ" (Smith 2001: 82). On another occasion, Lope complimented her beautiful hands and according to Ramón-Laca, "she imposed on him the harsh penalty of not receiving his visits for 15 days" (112). For a similar expression of praise according to her biography, Marcela told him she "would not see him for five years so he would know how much she was offended when he praised her mortal beauty" (Smith 2001: 82). Given the nature of a life account for a sister written by the nuns, the five-year penalty may have been an exaggeration. However, the period of fifteen days mentioned by Ramón-Laca does not appear in the biography and may simply be an error in his reading of the manuscript. Whatever the case, these comments remembered in the story of Marcela's life in religion clearly indicate her distress with her father's lack of understanding about her professed vocation.

In my many years of studying the colloquies, I have concluded that the two plays, written from the perspective of the young novice as she learns to resist temptations of the outside world and to choose the cloister rather than the world, reflect Marcela's early years in the convent. Her consciousness of Alma's difficulties may suggest some of her own thoughts and struggles. As well, the advice of the Virtues may mimic advice from her superiors and especially training from the Mistress of Novices. She also turns to strong memories of her years in Lope's house on Francos Street and calls on them to shape the plots of temptation and the words of censure. Lope references disappear after these two plays as the plot conflicts move on to two problems that occur within a convent. The antagonist of *On Virtues*, Luke Warm Devotion, represents a weak sister with a lackadaisical approach to the requirements for prayer hours and devotional exercises. She tries to convince Alma to share her attitude that rigorous commitment to requirements are bad for her health. The final morality play, *Foolish Zeal*, casts the antagonist as a visiting priest who arrives to check on the nuns. Rather than take the roles of the two Vices as in the earlier plays, Sor Marcela now chooses for herself the parts of Divine Love (i.e., Christ) and Peace, respectively. These roles allow an older, more mature Marcela not only to write lines to be spoken by these Virtues but also gives her the authority to preach. I have no doubt, despite the fact that three of the four colloquies have no date marking the writing or performance, that she writes now from the perspective of a respected leader within her Order. Her biographers, indeed, praise her as a much-loved Novice Mistress whose young charges held her in high esteem and when she left that office they were disconsolate (Smith 2001: 86). Convent records also list her five, three-year terms as Prioress totaling fifteen years of leadership: 1660-1663, 1668-1671, and finally three consecutive, three-year terms 1674-1683 (Arenal and Sabat-Rivers 13).



From Sor Marcela's poetry, she offers two heart-felt poems to solitude. Poem #13 (Arenal and Sabat-Rivers 409-11), celebrates the construction of individual cells at the convent. The sisters had long wanted to have private cells for prayer and meditation. In 1646 a rich widow, whose children had died, heard a crucifix tell her to go join the Discalced Trinitarians, which she did, supplying the funds needed (Smith 2001: 44-45). Having a private, peaceful space in the convent contrasts with her memories of Lope's house and the small bedroom shared with two half-sisters. Marcela, as the oldest of the siblings, almost certainly bore responsibility for household chores and care of the younger children. At the same time, we and Marcela know Lope had taken vows as a priest while continuing through three love affairs. What turbulence must have been in the mind and heart of the teenage Marcela with her sights already set on entering a convent. In this poem she praises the solitude of experienced souls, who in happy quietness embrace their tender husband. It is in solitude, she writes, that one knows that God alone satisfies the soul. Marcela and her Trinitarian sisters, having spent many years in crowded conditions, at last moved into a reconstructed section of the convent allowing for each one to have a private cell. The poem expresses gratitude to God with these words: "Finally, all the virtues, / all the gifts and graces, in happy solitude, / speak to the soul" (Arenal and Sabat-Rivers 410). Sor Marcela reflects the happiness of her sisters in the completion of the long-awaited cells affording them the enjoyment of peaceful meditation and private prayers. In a second poem to the blessings of solitude, Sor Marcela speaks for herself in first-person singular. Poem #22 expresses her own thoughts on the many blessings she receives in communication with her husband. The first 22 stanzas of the poem begin with the words "in you," speaking directly to solitude in the familiar, singular form of "you." She recounts all the moments of happiness, her gratitude for his love, the freedom to talk with him, the sweetness of his presence within her beloved solitude. In the final stanzas of the poem she gives thanks for solitude also as a space for knowing herself and her place in the world. I would suggest that what she celebrates here is the opportunity to enjoy fully her religious vocation, which legitimizes her life as a child of God.

To explore the complicated relationship between Lope and Marcela in the question of love or affection, I turn to the literary works of both and to the historical records of their personal interactions. Lope's first work dedicated to his daughter, *Help in Misfortune*, was published in 1620, the year before she entered the convent (Castro 245). These are his words in the brief dedication: "May God keep you and may you be fortunate, although you may not be so and even more if you inherit my luck, until you are consoled, as you console me" (Castro: 246). Perhaps the best-known homage to Marcela can be found in the lengthy poem describing the solemn ceremony of her vows in marriage to Christ. The poem is part of a letter written to Fernando de Herrera Maldonado. In one stanza Lope wrote that he loved her tenderly more like a suitor than a father, clothing her beauty in gold and silk. In other stanzas he imagines the changes required in her vocation: cutting her hair, wearing the rough robes of her Order, sleeping on straw and going barefoot. The poem ends, however, with words of acceptance

that she now lives far from the crazy world and its deceits, consecrated in love to God, tender and chaste, at sixteen years old (Ramón-Laca 105-09).

Lope's actions also testify to his caring for his daughter. In a letter in 1621, he appealed to the Duke of Sessa on her behalf for 1,000 ducats to satisfy in part the convent's requirement of a dowry. In a following letter in January 1622, Lope thanks the Duke for his gift to Marcela and assures him that he himself can provide the additional 1,000 ducats bringing the dowry of 2,000 (Marín 248-50). Her father visited her regularly in the convent until his death, except for the times when she would not receive him because he had offended her with worldly admiration. His love, or perhaps at least affection, seems obvious in his acknowledgement of their shared literary talents. It also bears mention here that he brought Marcela and her brother, Lope Félix, to live with him in Madrid after the broken relationship with Micaela de Luján. Yet he did not bring the three older children born of that relationship whom he had acknowledged as his.

From Marcela's perspective, Lope had numerous and serious shortcomings. However, in the end, he supported her decision to join the Discalced Trinitarians of Madrid for which she was forever grateful. When she chose her new name in religion, she took the name of Sor Marcela de San Félix, a name, no doubt, with several associations for her. First, I would suggest she honors the name of one of the founders of the male Discalced Trinitarian Order, San Félix de Valois. The Order was approved by the pope on December 17, 1198. Obviously, her choice of that name may also indicate affection for her father and for Lope Félix, the younger brother with whom she shared the first sixteen years of her life. At the death of her father, we also know that she requested the funeral procession to pass by the doors of the convent so that she might say her farewell. A painting by Suarez Llano shows the casket passing the convent with Marcela in an attitude of grief surrounded by her sisters who console her. Sor Marcela was said to have been most faithful to her father's memory, offering prayers for him for thirty-three years until her own death in 1687 (González Martel 75-76).

In this essay I describe what I understand of the emotional connection between a daughter and her father. Some guesswork is involved when searching to discover any relationship of centuries past, even with historical documents at hand. Nevertheless, in my twenty years of studying and writing about the literary production of Sor Marcela, I have developed what I can only describe as a strong feeling for how she negotiated the life that was hers. Despite the handicap of her illegitimate birth and the limits of being female, her intelligence, skill as a playwright and poet, sense of humor, and her Catholic faith allowed her to enjoy a fulfilling life of eighty-three years. My thanks to the professor who introduced us.

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