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FROM SCOPOPHILIA TO ABJECTION: VISION AND BLINDNESS IN THE *MONJA QUE SE ARRANCÓ LOS OJOS*

ABSTRACT

The brief untitled *exemplum* preserved uniquely in MS 77 of the Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo and generally known as the *Monja que se arrancó los ojos*, tells the tale of a nun who, rather than submit to the lechery of a king, opts instead to mutilate herself in order to spurn his attentions. This article, which draws on theories of the gaze and of abjection (showing how from a certain theoretical perspective they could be considered complementary hermeneutics for tackling the same issue), analyses the complex symbolic implications of self-mutilation, showing how the Nun's actions could be interpreted from a range of complementary perspectives.

KEY WORDS: *Exemplum*, hagiography, scopophilia, abjection.

RESUMEN:

El breve ejemplo intitulado preservado únicamente en el MS 77 de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo y conocido generalmente como la *Monja que se arrancó los ojos*, narra la historia de una monja que, en vez de someterse a la lujuria de un rey, opta por mutilarse para rechazar sus atenciones. Este artículo, que se funda en teorías de la vista y de la abyección (mostrando como desde una cierta perspectiva teórica podrían considerarse como hermenéuticas complementarias para abordar el mismo asunto), analiza las complejas implicaciones simbólicas de la auto-mutilación, mostrando como las acciones de la monja se podrían interpretar desde un panorama de perspectivas complementarias.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: Ejemplo, hagiografía, escopofilia, abyección.

1. THE MALE GAZE/THE EROTIC NUN

As Laura Mulvey's landmark analysis of twentieth-century cinema has shown, in societies structured by notions of sexual disequilibrium, pleasure in looking has traditionally been predicated on a dialectical opposition between active/male and passive/female roles. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure by scrutinizing prominent anatomical features such as her hair, eyes, lips, or the contours of her breast. This activity codes her appearance for visual and erotic impact, and transforms her into a sexualized plaything, an object of libidinal enjoyment, or as Mulvey puts it, the "leit-motif of erotic spectacle" (11). Having unwittingly satisfied a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, the sexualized woman holds the look and signifies male desire; she is displayed like an object and becomes exhibitionist in nature, her specific ontological status, like that of an unwilling participant in a beauty pageant, invalidated by the sexualizing identities imposed upon her. She begins as a result to connote a quality that Mulvey rightly but provocatively terms "to-be-looked-at-ness" (11).

In Freudian terms, scopophilia takes woman as an object for sexual stimulation and subjects her to a curious and controlling gaze. This concept is qualified in Mulvey's work in terms of its active or fetishistic value (14), as the physical beauty of the object is transformed into a source of pleasure and gratification that is both different from, as well as distanced from, the object under scrutiny. Vision, accordingly, becomes a crucial component in questions of sexuality and sexualization. Yet perhaps more importantly, as Freud recognizes (1977 69), it is one that can function independently of the erotogenic zones. By transforming the female object into a passive erotic spectacle, the process of looking becomes situational and political, and can be related to acts of voyeurism. In its most extreme form it can even become fixated, as Mulvey notes, into a perversion, producing obsessive Peeping Toms whose chief sexual satisfaction is derived from watching an objectified other in an active and controlling way.²

² Although, as Michael Camille notes, there is a danger of leaving "medieval spectators as beholders without a psychology" (2000 198), medieval and modern theories are not incompatible. As James F. Burke explains: "traditional theories of extromission and intromission held that a kind of ocular beam could either issue forth from the eye of the beholder or proceed to him or her from the viewed object. For the human subject, such a ray of light, whether conceived primarily as incoming or outgoing, would be the basic tool that would allow some variety of communication with the surrounding visual sphere" (25).

The medieval Castilian canon abounds with examples of female characters presented as passive raw material for the active male gaze. Yet few are more poignant, or indeed pertinent more broadly to questions of vision and blindness, than an untitled work known both as the *Monja que se arrancó los ojos* and as the *Ejemplo de una monja que era muy hermosa de fuera*. The text, which assumes the form of a pithy *exemplum*, is attested uniquely by MS 77 of the Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo (fols. 99^v–101^r), which dates from the first half of the fifteenth century and is most likely a copy of an earlier original. The manuscript, as Catherine Soriano and Alberto Miranda have shown, offers a complex and eclectic synthesis of devotional and didactic materials, and although a detailed analytical study is long overdue, a prominent feature is an emphasis on female virtue, with the tale of the Nun sandwiched between a lyrical treatment of the joys of the Virgin Mary (fols. 94^v–99^v) and a narrative account of the legend of St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins (fols. 101^r–04^r). It may also be that the hymn “Ilumina oculos meos” (fols 87^v–89^v) was included on the grounds of its thematic and conceptual affinity.

In broader terms, an obvious parallel is with St. Lucy, who is commonly depicted in art (although conspicuously not in early Castilian literature) as one whose eyes are gouged out as she attempts to defend her sexual integrity from the unsolicited advances of the Roman Prefect, Paschasius (González Palencia, Beresford 113–21). For this reason, she is presented in traditional iconography with a pair of severed eyes on a golden platter. The tale has implications in this respect not solely for the relationship between hagiography and the *exemplum* tradition (for it may be that it was either inspired by Lucy’s legend or that it represents Lucy in a different form), but for the broader transformative relationship between torture, identity, and the materiality and significance of the human body. It asks, in particular, about how identities are imposed through the power of the gaze, and how acts of savage corporeal violence are capable of destabilizing the image that is projected outwards and received by the beholder.

The *exemplum* begins with a deployment of the traditional *meollo/corteza* dialectic, as the Nun’s external beauty is presented as a visual correlative of her inner purity.³ This quality, which is constructed through the gaze of the (male) narrator and passed on thereafter to the audience, which accepts it as a standard element of gendered characterization, relates her to a range of female saints, notably Agatha, who displays a comparably harmonious equilibrium of inner and outer perfection:

³ As Berceo writes in the introduction to the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*: “tolgamos la corteza, al meollo entremos” (Baños 7, st. 16c).

“noble e fermosa por linaje e por cuerpo, mas mucho más noble e fermosa por alma” (Beresford 185). Yet the King’s gaze is differently constructed, and by focusing exclusively on the beauty of the Nun’s eyes (an organ that stands at the interface between interior and exterior, but which is here appraised exclusively in terms of its superficial surface appearance), his sexualized fantasies reach out vicariously in order to draw her into a process of libidinal enjoyment where she is reduced to the status of a passive erotic object. She in this way connotes the quality that Mulvey characterizes as to-be-looked-at-ness:⁴

Dize que un en monesterio de monjas avía una monja, la qual era muy fermosa de fuera e más de dentro. Esta bendita monja avía los ojos muy graciosos; e un rey, viendo la su gran fermosura, fue muy fuertemente encendido del sucio amor carnal de la luxuria e enbió por ella. E como le dixesen los mensajeros las nuevas, ella muy espantada del tal dicho, díxoles que por qué oviera el rey más amor della que de todas las otras; e díxéronle que porque avía los ojos muy más graciosos que todas ellas.

2. VISION DENIED/THE BLINDED NUN

The King’s desire fixes the Nun’s identity by impeding the articulation and circulation of contrary signifiers. In his eyes, she ceases to be a nun (an unattainable *sponsa Christi* defined by the veil as a symbolic marker of celibacy and obedience) and is transformed instead into an erotic plaything, a sparkly-eyed figure of lust. His stereotype denies agency in the construction and projection of identity, and functions on the basis of knowledge that is both simplistic and defective. It also, by defining the Nun exclusively according to the desirability of her eyes, succeeds in essentializing her identity in a single part of the anatomy. The process, which is effectively one of *ocularization*, functions as the sexualizing male gaze imposes an identity that reduces her significance to a single libido-raising attribute. She is in this way rendered different from her fellows (in a sense, becoming her eyes) as the exercise of scopic surveillance imposes a dialectic of pleasure/unpleasure that marks her out as superlative among women. There is an obvious inverted resemblance

⁴ Quotations are from Lacarra (1999 309), and for a palaeographic transcription, see Soriano and Miranda. For a study of related versions, see Lacarra (2000). An analogue appears in the traditional lyric “No me las enseñes más, / que me matarás” (Frenk 284–85, no. 375B), where the speaker’s scopic imagination allows him to see through the Nun’s veil to the “teticas blancas” within. As Freud affirms, “This curiosity [i.e. the gaze of the speaker] seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts” (1977 69). For the poem’s ambiguity, see Deyermond (1982), and for its eroticism, Gornall. The crucial point is that the partial repetition of the *estribillo* suggests that the speaker overcomes his scruples and engages in a voyeuristic ocular fantasy that culminates in sexual climax.

in this respect to the procedures outlined by Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, who write on the tendency towards epidermalization in postcolonial discourse, the latter focusing specifically on the relationship between identity and the reductive potential of the stereotype (see also Huddart 35–55).

Yet the Nun refuses to accept the imposition of an externally authored identity and opts to confront the power of the eye as a signifier of difference. She may have unwittingly become a passive object of erotic spectacle and have connoted the quality of to-be-looked-at-ness. Yet through an affirmation of the right to exercise agency, she is able to strike a hammerblow against enforced passivity and regain control over her body, both literally and symbolically. This is achieved in a brutal and gruesome manner, as she gouges out the organ observed by the King:

Estonce ella, con muy gran devoción e fe, acomendóse a su verdadero esposo, Jhesu Christo, el qual nunca fallece a los que verdaderamente lo llaman, e dixo a los mensajeros: “Pues que así es, dadme un poco de espacio para que me apareje, por que honestamente parezca delante el rey.” E entró en su cámara e sacóse sus ojos, e puestos en un plato, dixo a los mensajeros: “Tomad esto por lo qual el rey se enamoró de mí, por que yo sea pura e linpia ante los ojos del mi muy amado e verdadero esposo, Jhesu Christo.” Estonce ellos, muy espantados del tal fecho, dixéronlo al rey.

The act of self-mutilation allows the Nun to question her position as a passive object of erotic spectacle, and to reassert distance by breaking through the alienating facade of gendered identity to discover a hidden reality or inner vision. Her actions accord well in this respect with the Gospel maxim: “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29). By following this course of action, the Nun refuses to regard the process of scopophilic sexualization as natural or inevitable, and in so doing, succeeds in questioning the unconscious structuring of patriarchal society and the implicit norms of the phallogocentric order. As the King once experienced pleasure in looking, the Nun now gains satisfaction not simply by denying herself the capacity to offer visual acknowledgement of the King’s gaze, but by connoting a quality that could potentially be thought of in Mulvian terms as *unable-to-be-looked-at-ness*. This transformation problematizes the dialectical relationship between interior/exterior and blindness/vision, for while she renders herself disgusting in the King’s worldly eyes (the fantasy object dissolving to reveal the empty placeholder of desire as the symbolic gives way to the real), she becomes cleaner and purer in the eyes of the celestial bridegroom, whose sexless desire is inscribed directly into the flesh.

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In this respect, the Nun conforms to the traditional ambiguity associated with the blind. Having deprived herself of one of the body's most precious gifts, she renders herself anatomically incomplete. Yet she also projects herself as one whose defiled physicality identifies her as alien, as other, as polar opposite. Although innocent, she becomes associated by implication with delinquents blinded for the transgression of basic moral or religious laws. Indeed, as Moshe Barasch (25) observes, (self-)blinding is a primordial act normally reserved for the transgression of taboos such as incest, and offences against God, whether or not they are intentionally committed. It becomes tempting, in view of this, to link self-mutilation to a latent sense of guilt, with the Nun, indoctrinated as a daughter of Eve into an instinctive understanding of her inherent sinfulness, inverting the law of cause and effect by viewing herself as the culpable party.

Yet although the blind have lost an important sense, they are often endowed with a mysterious supernatural ability. This ambivalence explains why audiences can experience pity and compassion, while oscillating awkwardly between moods of awe and anxiety, suspecting that the blind can see into the uncanny recesses of the soul, and that they have been rewarded with knowledge that goes beyond the reach of humanity. In some cases the power of the blind extends to divine intercession, as they are perceived as being able to traverse the liminal space between life and death. A tangible absence is in this way counterbalanced by an ineffable (but nonetheless, perceptibly corresponding) increment in authority. In fact, while the blind may be unable to see, they can in some respects see more clearly than others, experiencing a sublimated, spiritualized form of vision that gives them an aura, an inherent dignity, that mere mortals are denied. They can in this way become threatening, and be seen not simply as disturbingly incomplete, but as harbingers of the defiled physicality that will be experienced (particularly by the sinful) in the afterlife.

3. VISUALIZING LOSS/THE ABJECT NUN

How exactly the Nun gouges out her eyes, and perhaps more pertinently, how she arranges them neatly on a platter and presents them to the King's heralds, are questions that the *exemplum* leaves unexplored. The fact that she experiences no pain or discomfort and is able to go about her business with workmanlike efficiency, however, suggests that she is able to transcend the limitations of the body and react with saintly impassivity, displaying an ability to subject herself to corporeal suffering without any visible or audible reaction. This miraculous quality emphasizes her strength, as well as the efficacy of the decision to undertake an act of self-mutilation. It also sharpens the extent of the polarity between her and the King, whose pain is not merely reported, but linked specifically to a decision to undertake penance

to atone for his wicked desires: “Estonce el rey ovo en sí muy gran dolor, e fizo penitencia de su mal deseo”. Whether or not this comes in the form of asceticism (the deliberate immersion of the self in pain in the pursuit of a higher objective) is once again, a question left unexplored. That the body is able to serve in both instances as a physical *exemplum*, however, succeeds in reiterating the extent to which questions of identity and corporeality become impossible to disaggregate.

As Esther Cohen observes, pain is “essentially an individual experience, unsharable and intransmissible” (48). Yet as it is almost always filtered by cultural dictates, it becomes a form of narrative shorthand capable of establishing or reiterating the boundaries and limits of identity. In Christian contexts, pain functions as part of “a symbolically charged cycle of suffering” (48) and is associated with punishment, sin, and death. Pain is not merely the price paid for original sin and the Expulsion from Paradise, but for the redemption of that sin with the suffering of Christ in the Crucifixion. As a central historical and cosmological force, pain becomes an aspect of communal consciousness and an emblem of intersubjective experience, providing an avenue to knowledge not merely of the body, but “of the soul, of truth, of reality, and of God” (53). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Christians should be enjoined to accept pain as unavoidably implicated in decisions affecting questions of culpability and future contingency (see Binski, Merback, and Mills).

The King’s experience of pain is complex. With the gift of blindness, the Nun clearly sees him in a way that he is not able to see her, and as she looks deeply into his soul with eyes that in some ways seem to continue working as they are presented to him on a platter, he is forced to confront the appalling physical consequences of his lustful desire. It may even be that an image of his lust has been indelibly imprinted on the eyes themselves, reflecting an uncanny impression of the destabilizing effects of sexual desire backwards towards its point of origin. Yet as an *exemplum* inscribed directly into the flesh, the Nun invites the male gaze upon herself in a self-consciously narcissistic manner, and in so doing, succeeds in replacing pleasure by pain. The transition, which is from passive to narcissistic scopophilia (Mulvey 13–15), is predicated on the function of the body as a bounded system and as a political object over which relations of power and resistance can be played out (Grosz, Camille 1994). In her anatomically complete state, the Nun functions as a semiotic signifying system, which, although spectacularly misread by the King, maintains a degree of ontological stability. However, as she gouges out her eyes and challenges the seemingly irreducible materiality of the human form, she disrupts and distorts the production and reception of stabilized meaning, deliberately undermining the fragility of the symbolic order and in this way ensuring the collapse of the King’s sexualizing desire (Grosz 80–81).

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This process, as described by Julia Kristeva, is one of abjection, with the once clearly demarcated borderline between inside/outside, subject/object, and self/other collapsing into a state of ambiguity, as the Nun separates a part of herself to redefine the self that she regards as authentic — the unwilling sex object re-reading herself as a loyal and devoted *sponsa Christi*. The crucial point, as Kristeva avers, is that in order to maintain a place in the symbolic order and constitute herself as a unified whole, the subject aspires to maintain a *corps propre*, a clean and proper sense of corporeal integrity. Yet as the abject can never be fully eradicated from the construction of identity, it continues to linger at the periphery of self-image, forever threatening its illusory unities and stabilities with suggestions of disruption and dissolution. This most commonly results in a situation in which the subject becomes immured by ambiguity, locked into a type of in-between state that disturbs our conventional understanding of identity, system, and order. The result is a contradictory oscillation between moods of horror and fascination, as the abject reminds the ego not merely of the act of breaking away from an unwanted (self-)image, but of the possibility of a humiliating return. Indeed, as Kristeva explains (see also Oliver 48–68, McAfee 45–57, and Grosz):

The abject has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. (1–2)

Although the Nun’s precarious self-image can be challenged by the eyes on the platter, which belong neither to the subject nor the object, and the empty sockets that invite completion, the most obvious function of the abject can be seen in relation to the King. In its fetishistic form, as Mulvey (14) affirms, scopophilia takes the subject as an object for stimulation by imposing its controlling and curious gaze. Yet in its narcissistic form, the observer is invited to experience identification in a process that has often been related to the Lacanian mirror stage (see Mulvey 9–10, Lacan 2002, and Homer 24–26). This begins when an infant first encounters itself as a separate entity, typically by means of a reflected image or equivalent. Recognizing a human face with characteristics similar to its own, the infant experiences a moment of joyful identification. Yet as the process is based on imaginary misrecognition, with the mirror offering an ideal ego that is perfect, complete, and, unlike that of the child, fully in control of its own bodily experience, it can also produce a sense of incompleteness. This can in turn lead to moods of alienation and fragmentation, and

ultimately, to situations of conflict, as self and other become locked into a never-ending cycle of recognition and concomitant disavowal.

The gift of gouged-out eyes presented on a platter shifts the emphasis of the narrative from fetishism to narcissism, as the Nun, once unwillingly observed, now enthusiastically invites a very different form of observation upon her. With gouged-out eyes and empty sockets, she becomes a source of abjection, of disgust, of repugnance. Her invitation vigorously encourages procedures of identification, but in her state of fragmentary incompleteness, she becomes a paradigmatic generator of horror, preying on the deepest fears of the King's imagination, and in this way inviting automatic rejection. This process can be read in Lacanian terms, for as fantasy dissolves and the real is made accessible through the other, the object ceases to appear as something worthy of love, and instead leaves behind an unrecognizable remainder, which is referred to in his work variously as the "cadeau d'une merde", "le fruit anal", and "le *a* excrémental" (1979 268). This, as Gerald Moore (65–70) recognizes, is the innermost kernel of being, stripped of the fantasmic support that rendered it palatable to subjective experience, and which is rejected accordingly.

For Mitchell B. Merback, the power of the abject lies specifically in the wound, which generates disgust at the pulsating boundaries of the body. Once a wound appears before our eyes, "it is as if a fault line has opened up across the body's topography, one that threatens to tear open the ever wider expanses of the body's hidden interior" (113). The process of identification is in this sense mimetic, as the King, invited to consider the dissolution of the integrity of the vital distinction between interior and exterior, experiences the pain of an opened body with a form uncannily close to that of his own. Indeed, as Merback argues, "the wounded body of our vision somehow ceases to be *that* body and becomes, in an uncanny way, *our* body as well" (113, emphasis in original). His reading accords in this respect with that of Kristeva, who argues: "The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic. In order to confirm that, it should endure no gash other than that of circumcision. ... Any other mark would be the sign of belonging to the impure, the non-separate, the non-symbolic, the non-holy" (102). Needless to say, the process of abject repudiation reaches its natural extreme when overlaid by issues of responsibility, blame, and ultimately, self-loathing. The King, recognizing not simply his disgust at the gift of severed body parts, but his agency in ensuring their production, is compelled to question his own anatomical integrity, with visions of his liquid interior spilling out in an act of involuntary mimetic identification.

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4. VISUALIZING IMPOTENCE/THE CASTRATED KING

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the hollowed-out eye is structured in the form of a rim, a corporeal interface between that which is inside the body, and therefore a part of the subject, and that which remains outside the body, and thus, an object for the subject (Grosz 86–89). The blurring of the distinction between the two, and the impossibility of maintaining clear-cut lines of demarcation, conforms not only to Kristeva's reading of the abject, but to the inversion of Mulvey's principle of to-be-looked-at-ness, which could (at least from this perspective) be regarded as an inverted theoretical way of addressing the same essential issue. Indeed, as John Lechte argues, the abject is the ego's undesirable face: not simply "the dark side of narcissism", but precisely the image that "Narcissus would not want to have seen as he gazed into his pool" (160). It seems strange in this respect that the two discourses, despite the fact that they are antithetically related (and in this sense mutually reinforcing), have developed in almost complete isolation from one another.

As all boundaries, Lacan argues, can be traversed by the incorporation or expulsion of objects, many of which have an erotic value, the rim functions simultaneously as a symbol both of excess, or that which is unwanted, and lack, or that which becomes necessary for completion. It becomes possible in this respect to question whether the Nun's eyes are purely literal, or whether as an essentialized anatomical signifier, they can be related more figuratively to the process of ocular exchange that underpins the relationship between the King and the Nun. As a site of ingress/egress capable of compromising the notion of the body as a bounded entity and of impacting on the ontological instability of self-image, the eye becomes a type of surrogate for the sexual organ. In the opening section of the narrative, the King's ocular contemplation redefines the Nun as an object to be sexually enjoyed: a body to be lusted after, undressed, and ultimately, penetrated by the phallus. Yet if phallic penetration, whether in the form of ocular fantasy or anatomical reality, can be read as a procedure of internalization, with two bodies becoming one, then the act of gouging stands reciprocally and antithetically as symbol of externalization, with one body clearly becoming two. The Nun's self-mutilation stands in this respect not just as a provocative rejection, but as one that is charged with corrosive symbolic significance. In fact, it becomes possible to relate the eyes specifically to the traditional root of the male sexual drive in the testicles, and to read the gift both as a stern admonishment designed to humiliate and belittle masculine authority and as a gruesome proleptic warning.

For Freud, the correspondence between the eyes and the testicles is imbricated with the issue of castration anxiety. The infant, recognizing that his mother lacks the phallus, fears the rivalry of his father and the possibility that his own sexual

organ may be severed. The parallel between the two is enhanced partly by the fear of blindness, which commonly functions in the unconscious as a symbol of castration, but perhaps more obviously as a result of basic visual association, particularly with regard to questions of comparability in size, shape, and form. Indeed, as Freud notes: “The study of dreams, fantasies and myths has taught us also that anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is quite often a substitute for the fear of castration. When the mythical criminal Oedipus blinds himself, this is merely a mitigated form of the penalty of castration, the only one that befits him according to the *lex talionis*” (2003 139).

For Martha A. Easton, “Both the eyes and the testicles are soft, round objects, and damage to one body part could unconsciously suggest damage to the other” (101). It becomes possible in this way to read the content of the platter not simply as a powerful rebuff, but as a symbolically charged rejection of male sexuality and its relationship to worldly dominion. The King, coming face to face with the power and effect of his libido, is presented with a form of symbolic castration that succeeds in dampening his ardour, and in offering an abrupt reminder not only of his essential impotence, but that of the order for which he stands. It may also, at the level of a symbolic prolepsis, suggest a more profound neurosis concerning the judgement that he will eventually be brought to face. This seems most likely in view of the medieval fondness for literalism and appropriateness in the depiction of hellish torment, with sodomites skewered anally by flaming hot pokers and other devices, and the lustful subjected to a range of comparably sexualized fates, notably in church carvings, which offer an implacably efficient means with which to entrench a sense of disgust for the flesh and of the punishment meted out to those who err (see Jerman and Weir). In fact, the King may, in a very real sense, fear that the gouging of the Nun’s eyes will be punished in the afterlife by the severing of his masculinity.

5. VISUALIZING OPPOSITION/THE SYMBOLIC NUN

The crucial point, of course, is that the King is not just a man, but an exemplar of the symbolic order and the law. His erotic drive may lead to a compromising situation and an act of personal penance, but as his masculine phallogocentric role as reigning monarch is also challenged, he is revealed as being unfit to exercise dominion over his underlings. His misuse of power subjects an innocent woman sadistically to his will, while his gaze transforms her voyeuristically into an object of sexual stimulation. In so doing, the mask of ideological correctness slips temporarily to reveal a fallible human interior. Yet the Nun, in her own performatively melodramatic way, becomes an instrument of education, reorienting and inflecting the lord/vassal relationship

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by reminding him of the need to exercise spiritual purity. The suggestiveness of this relationship is enhanced by the fact that she too is nameless: she is an idealized abstraction, an everywoman, a cipher for pious women leading virtuous lives.⁵

Yet we might also wonder, from a certain perspective, whether the Nun is a woman at all. If the clash between Nun and King can be read ideologically, it becomes tempting to see the text not as an encounter between individuals, but between conceptual entities locked (at least in part) within the confines of the symbolic order. In this light, the encounter could potentially be read as a comment on the relationship between Man and Woman and the gendering of sexual paradigms in society. A possibility more pregnant with suggestiveness, however, is that the confrontation could be mapped onto the relationship between Church and State, with the lowly female standing inevitably as a representation of nurturing mother Ecclesia. If this is the case, then the implications of the text become rather more tantalizing, as the implicit suggestion appears to be that the Church must occasionally shed its blood in order to maintain an appropriately symbiotic and proactively educational relationship to the State.

The image of Ecclesia, as Jo Spreadbury demonstrates, is derived ultimately from Ephesians 5:21–33, where the union of husband and wife is modelled on the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church. This association echoes the nuptial language used for the Old Testament covenant between God and Israel, while in the Middle Ages the formalized embodiment of the Church as an institution became enshrined in conceptual commonplaces such as “*corpus quod est Ecclesia*” and “*corpus scilicet Ecclesia*” (94). Perhaps the most obvious point of applicability, however, is in visual symbolism and its relationship to questions of anatomical extraction, for while Ecclesia is often depicted as being born from the wound in Christ’s side (in itself a typological reworking of the birth of Eve from Adam’s rib), it is also frequently represented as a figure carrying a chalice replete with the blood of Christ. It becomes in this way, as Spreadbury argues, a powerful female image and an embodiment of Christian identity. The parallel is enhanced by the fact that in both instances the formalized presentation of body parts leads not simply to a process of acceptance and repentance, but is presented specifically as being salvifically beneficial.

⁵ Lacarra notes that in some versions the King is identified as English, or more specifically, as Richard the Lionheart (1999 308, 2000 88). A Castilian example is given in Clemente Sánchez de Vercial’s *Libro de los exemplos por a. b. c* (no. 322), although in a slightly later example (no. 370) both Nun and King are anonymous (see Keller 251 and 286). In a related example (no. 371), St. Thomas of Canterbury acts as intercessor.

The relationship between the Nun and Ecclesia reflects most pertinently on the identity of the King, as it becomes tempting to read his symbolic significance in terms of the traditionally antithetical pairing of Ecclesia and Synagoga. While the former, as Barasch (77–91) shows, stands for Christian virtue, and is beautifully arranged in regal garb, the latter stands for the perceived ignorance of Judaism and the Old Law, and is commonly depicted not merely with a blindfold, but with shattered symbols of monarchy. The most important are a crown that teeters precariously on its head and a broken lance with a pennant trailing almost to the ground. The essential correspondence is that if the Nun, who blinds herself anatomically whilst retaining perfect vision, can be equated to Ecclesia, the King, who retains vision but is morally blind, comes to stand by antithetical implication as an embodiment of Synagoga. His sexual folly is not in this sense a mere sin, but a symptom of a more insidious blindness that relates him to the perceived ignorance of the Jews in denying and failing to assimilate the truth of Christian victory. Indeed, as Barasch affirms, Synagoga is blind “not because of the sins that Israel has committed, but because of the very nature that prevented it from seeing the light of redemption” (84).

A more significant implication is that, by inverting traditional gender representations, which present Synagoga as female, the parallel provides a further means with which to belittle the King’s masculinity. The broken lance could potentially be related in this respect to the deflation of his lust and the questioning of the phallogocentric order. Indeed, as Gregory S. Hutcheson has shown in relation to depictions of the sodomitic Moor, the relationship between blindness and sexual sin is used as a marker not just of difference, but as a way of collectivizing identities that are ideologically opposed to behaviours that should be promoted and lauded. As such, the King becomes a foil to normativity, an antithetical moral aberration, a symbol of all that kingship is not. The corollary is that blindness is not just a convenient word, but a powerful signifier, capable of marginalizing and collectivizing those who oppose the authority of the Church. In fact, it becomes a way of marking him out as a symbolic Jew, as one whose actions compel the Nun to engage in a form of Christ-like sacrifice by inscribing his sins upon her body. She could be read in this respect not just as a female victim, but as a Christological surrogate capable of transcending the limitations and restrictions of gender, and of functioning as a powerful focal point for the expression of devotion.

6. VISUALIZING TRIUMPH/SIGHT IMPROVED

The important didactic point, of course, is that the King dutifully undertakes penance. He accepts the eyes as a brusque corporeal reprimand from mother Ecclesia and thereafter adopts a chaste and disciplined approach towards matters of sexual

«From scopophilia to abjection: vision and blindness in the *Monja...*»

transgression. Whether or not the eyes can be read as part of the pan-European fondness for sacred relics, and whether or not they are subsequently incorporated into acts of devotion in which the severed part functions synecdochally as an evocation of the pious whole, are themes that remain unexplored. Yet by accepting the gift, the King opens his eyes, both literally and metaphorically, and in so doing, comes to a realization of the danger of the gaze and the sexualization of unattainable female subjects. It may be in this respect that there is a subliminal reference to a third iconographic tradition, that of Concordia, as Synagoga's blindfold is removed when repentance leads to an acceptance of the inevitable Christian victory (see Deyermond 1989).

The Nun, in contrast, is commended for her steadfastness and devotion to Christ, and rewarded with a pair of eyes that are clearer and better than those that she gouged from their sockets:

E luego la noche siguiente, como la bendita monja estudiase muy consolada porque así avía escapado, e estando así muy fea ante los ojos de los hombres, e muy amada e muy hermosa ante los ojos del su muy amado esposo, Jhesu Christo, en la mañana quando despertó, fallóse sana e sus ojos muy más claros e mejores que los tenía de antes. ¡O, bendita sea esposa que más quiso a sí mesma atormentar que ofender al su esposo, Jhesu Christo! ¡Mas mucho más sea bendito el esposo que tal gracia e ayuda da a los que verdaderamente lo aman e sirven!

For the narrator, the moral of the tale is loyalty, with self-mutilation regarded as a pragmatic and legitimate mechanism for spurning the attention of rivals to Christ in his role as celestial lover. The Nun, who subjects herself to a savage and brutal act, finds a way not merely to defend her integrity, but to strengthen and reinforce the power of her bond, as she focuses on an inner, spiritual gaze that gives both parties pleasure in looking. Her actions in this way become political, as she plays on the relationship between interior/exterior and beauty/ugliness, and in so doing succeeds in transforming the focus of the narrative from “the mere description of woman as spectacle to the male psyche whose needs the spectacle serves” (Chaudhuri 33). She also, by temporarily inscribing a symbol of her devotion to Christ in the flesh (and thereby connoting the quality of unable-to-be-looked-at-ness), succeeds in setting her sexless but spousely devotion against the irrevocable corporeal damage that would have been suffered during coitus.

The efficacy and appropriateness of her actions are validated by an act of miraculous intervention. The restoration of sight, as Barasch avers, offers an image not simply of the transition from bondage to salvation, or darkness to light, but of the passage from death to eternal life. It is in this sense the most important of Christian miracles, an event that goes far beyond the conceivable boundaries of the terrestrial world, and is so utopian in character that it is commonly understood in

Christian literature as a distinctive sign of the Messianic age. The crucial point is that “In its sheer improbability, the miracle of healing the blind, of giving back sight to those who have lost it, has a certain affinity to the ultimate miracle of the revival of the dead. Because of this polar inversion, one understands how Christianity, totally oriented toward redemption, was mentally and emotionally prepared to make the healing of the blind a central image” (54). Its status accords in this respect with the formulation of prophecy in Isaiah, where we are told of the day when “the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness” (29:18). It also recalls the multiplication in the New Testament of tales of the miraculous healing of the blind, which perform an instrumental role in affirming Christ’s divinity. Perhaps most immediately applicable, however, are the words of John 9:39 (“the blind will see and those who see will become blind”), as they reflect in various ways on the resolution of the complex, ambiguous interplay between literal and metaphorical.

The tale, in this sense, is an illustration of a new beginning. The Nun’s mental and physical trauma shunts the emphasis of the narrative from the symbolic to the real. Her damaged, mutilated body becomes the antithesis of aesthetic desirability, and in its temporarily abject state, it offers an evidentiary witnessing of the precarious fragility of phallogocentric power. By tearing open one orifice in order to maintain the anatomical integrity of another, the Nun ruptures the traditional homogeneity of self by producing a grotesque, heterogeneous body. In so doing, she affects a transgressive inflection of patriarchal norms and is able to problematize questions of sexual difference by replacing an externally authored identity by one in which female agency is key. She becomes in this way a type of phobic object, a sacrificial victim whose incomplete body compels the observer to experience the disturbing agony of the wound and the concomitant inevitability of death and judgement. The process, fundamentally, is mimetic, and is predicated on procedures of homeomorphic identification in which human bodies (both male and female alike) are appraised in terms of their essential ocular function. Yet by replacing scopophilia by abjection and forcing the King to appreciate the significance of his actions, the Nun gains better eyes and is able to cement her status as a *sponsa Christi*. The King, in turn, abandons his lustful self and embarks on a course of action that will lead to a better life, and ultimately, his salvation. The abject conforms in this respect to Kristeva’s assumption that it is “a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego) ... an alchemy that transforms death into a start of new life, of significance” (15).

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