

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and the Politics of Religion: Gender Construction and the Nineteenth-Century Devotional Manual

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Abstract

Like the diary and private letters, the woman-authored devotional of the nineteenth century has been acknowledged but undervalued as a literary genre. This study examines the important connection between religious discourse, emancipative ideals, and the construction of the masculine and the feminine in Gómez de Avellaneda's Manual del cristiano (1847) and Devocionario (1867).

While women have been denied social equality with men throughout history, religion has been a route for women in the past to obtain one type of equality with men: spiritual equality. “Religions, meant to be vessels for the celebration of life, have told women that they are inferior, the origin of humankind’s fall, the temptation to man’s purity, the source of his sin. Her own body, in its life-giving cycles, is called ‘unclean’” (King xiv). But within the Christian tradition, women, though deemed inferior to men, were entitled to choose, along with their male counterparts, between eternal salvation and eternal damnation. A woman’s soul could be redeemed upon her death, that is, saved “from a state of sinfulness and its consequences” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*) even if a woman’s living body could not.¹ For many nineteenth-century women writers in Europe and the United States the struggle for political, social, and professional rights was often accompanied by a profound sense of religious commitment (Miller 209). “If tradition, religion and daily practice inculcated in women a deep sense of mental inferiority, which they were to regard as both natural and God-given, one must wonder how

some of them managed to overcome this sense and give themselves authority and warrant to think and speak, even to write” (Lerner 65). Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814-1973), author of dozens of plays, novels, and essays, hundreds of poems, and two Catholic devotional manuals, was well aware of societal limitations based on her sex. She was able to overcome this sense of mental inferiority, however, and capitalized on religious discourse and concepts of spiritual equality, emphasizing the role of Christianity in the liberation of the oppressed. While the critical bibliography on Avellaneda pales in comparison to that on her male counterparts, she remains among the most written about female writers of nineteenth-century Cuba and Spain.

Most of Avellaneda’s works draw on religious discourse, be it prayers to the Virgin, affirmation of the Catholic kingdom, or theological arguments in support of women and slaves as men’s equals. The majority of literary texts from the nineteenth-century Spanish-speaking world are in one way or another built upon a Catholic worldview, and the two devotional manuals Avellaneda authored in 1847 and 1867 are no exception. These texts, which have been largely ignored by critics due to their relative inaccessibility and female authorship, provide for us a unique example of the use of religious discourse as a tool for both critiquing and affirming the roles of men and women in nineteenth-century Spanish and Cuban societies. The purpose of this article is to examine the significance of these apparently orthodox devotional manuals authored by a woman of the laity, addressed to all Christians, blessed by Church and State, and yet radical in their deviation from dominant scripts for manhood and womanhood in the nineteenth-century, as well as in their break with linguistic conventions reflecting maleness as normative.

The Devotionals in Context

It is not surprising that devotionals approved by the censors were the most acceptable books for women to read during the nineteenth century. While the moral judgements as to what women should and should not have been reading are documented extensively, what remains more elusive is the amount of reading of both recommended or banned texts that actually took place. As is true today, theologian Margaret Miles reminds us that “[h]istorical manuals of instruction in the practice of Christianity comprise a very diverse literature, not only in instructions given but also in literary quality. The fact that it is such a large and diverse body of writing makes it clear that do-it-yourself manuals on how to live a Christian life were attractive to a large number of people” (8). In the words of one critic, devotional

literature was abundant “ad nauseam”² during the nineteenth century as well, and still has not been inventoried in a manner helpful to researchers.

The fact that Avellaneda’s devotional manuals are available to us today is indeed remarkable. In 1846, Avellaneda married Don Pedro Sabater, a member of the Spanish Court. Just three months after their marriage, the sickly Don Pedro, accompanied by Avellaneda, traveled to Paris for medical treatment. En route back to Spain, his illness overcame him. Avellaneda buried her husband in Bordeaux and sought solace in the Convent of Lorette. While in the convent she began to write her first devotional manual, *Manual del cristiano*. After Avellaneda submitted the devotional manual for publication, the publisher went bankrupt. Thinking her work was lost, some twenty years later Avellaneda wrote her second devotional, *Devocionario*, which was published in Seville in 1867. The *Manual* was finally published in 1975, some 129 years after it was written. The 1867 *Devocionario*, however, has never been republished and remains a rare text. While the second is longer (503 pages as opposed to the 231 pages of the 1975 edition), most critics agree that the first is more personal and passionate, but that both are of high literary quality.³

In her study of the classic manuals of devotion, Margaret Miles, feminist theologian, concludes that “devotional manuals have been one of the methods by which Christian people were trained to a religious uniformity that concealed the injustices of the societies in which they lived” (181). Avellaneda’s manuals do indeed reveal a certain complicity with social conditioning characteristic of nineteenth-century Spain and Cuba, but they also deviate in radical ways from other devotional manuals, especially with respect to gender construction. St. Francis de Sales’ *Introduction to the Devout Life* and Erasmus’ *Enchiridion*, for example, present a worldview in which the normative Christian is understood to be male and “[w]omen are not represented as human beings with subjectivity, but as threat to men’s spiritual integrity, as moral lesson, and as daily temptation” (Miles 83).⁴ While “the social role served by devotional manuals was reinforcement rather than correction of secular gender conditioning” (Miles 26), a study of Avellaneda’s devotionals reveals some assumptions and an agenda that undermine the universalization of the male perspective. For Avellaneda, religious discourse was a politically charged and empowering tool.

While early on in contemporary feminist movements spirituality was relegated to the margins for its perceived lack of relevance, more recently even secular feminists have validated spirituality as a viable part of women’s

lives and a worthwhile field to explore⁵. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us that the Bible is not simply a religious book; it is also a profoundly political book that continues to inform the self-understandings of American and European secularized societies and cultures. “Feminist biblical interpretations therefore have a critical political significance not only for women in biblical religion but for all women in Western societies” (xi). She argues that feminists cannot afford to simply dismiss the Bible, as so many have, because it legitimates patriarchal power and oppression, but rather that feminists need to reclaim biblical religion because “[i]t has also provided authorization and legitimization for women who have rejected slavery, racism, anti-Semitism, colonial exploitation, and misogyny as unbiblical and against God’s will” (xiii). Fiorenza sees the feminist movement in biblical religion as more than a civil rights movement. “Its goal is not simply the ‘full humanity’ of women, since humanity as we know it is male-defined. The goal is women’s (religious) self-affirmation, power, and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization, and exploitation” (xv). It is, for Fiorenza, a liberation movement articulating for women a theology of “self-affirmation” that enables women to realize “that our alienation from other women—the separation between white and black women, middle-class and poor women, native American and European women, Jewish and Christian women, Protestant and Catholic women, nun-women or clergy-women and laywomen, lesbian and heterosexual women, First World or Third World women—is in the words of Adrienne Rich ‘a separation from ourselves’” (xv). Our separation from the Other is also a separation from our Creator.

Avellaneda’s writings provide a wealth of perspectives about how she found strength and courage through her religious faith to call for systemic transformations recognizing the dignity of all human beings. Though the two devotional manuals she authored were not radically subversive documents banned for their progressive content, as were two of her novels, their subversiveness lies in Avellaneda’s quiet usurpation of the male domain of naming the theological. Carmen Bravo-Villasante proposes that it was indeed rare for a woman with no vocational ties to the Church to author devotional manuals, especially a woman who had undergone intense public scrutiny for her various love affairs and the out-of-wedlock birth of her daughter (14). What, then, does the creation of these devotionals represent in light of nineteenth-century Spain and Cuba and the history of women and Christianity?

The choice of the Queen Mother (María Cristina de Borbón) and the Duchess of Montpensier (Luisa) as dedicatees of each respective devo-

tional is a significant act in itself. They were rich, powerful, and independent women who either explicitly or implicitly would affirm and give authority to Avellaneda's texts. The dedication of these religious texts to women of political and social prominence is significant in other ways as well. These texts not only passed through the formal process of male ecclesiastical censorship, they also bore the mark of Spanish royalty, thus conveying the sense that these devotionals were embraced by the Church and the State. Because Cristina and Luisa are examples of women in powerful leadership positions, connecting them to these religious manuals of devotion reminds the reader of the dignity and contributions of women, and sets the stage for embracing their full personhood.

More important still for Avellaneda's exploration of the theological realm through her writing, however, was her insistence that the dignity and contributions of women are to be affirmed and valued by society because they are affirmed and valued by God. A cursory reading of Avellaneda's writings indeed confirms her extensive knowledge and understanding of the Bible and biblical themes. Two examples are worth mentioning here. The first is *Sab*, published in 1841 and banned from Cuba in the nineteenth century. This antislavery novel established a clear connection between religious morality and abolitionism, thereby condemning slavery (including the enslavement of women) as immoral. Avellaneda drew from Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" to point to the humanity of all in spite of human injustice and oppression. Rosemary Radford Ruether states that "[t]raditionally the 'neither male nor female' of the New Testament has been seen as an eschatological, not a historical, possibility. It might be expressed in personal or even institutional forms that transcended 'nature,' but not translated back into accepted social institutions of the state, the family or the church" (*Women of Spirit* 25). Avellaneda's novel called for historical changes that would transform the eschatological possibilities into material realities.

In what would be her greatest theatrical masterpiece, *Baltasar*, performed in 1858, Avellaneda continued to promote ideas of equality. In her prologue she wrote the following about the protagonists: "Elda y Ruben representan . . . los dos seres más débiles y abyectos de la sociedad antigua: la mujer y el esclavo, rehabilitados sólo por el Cristianismo" (*Obras literarias vol. 2*, 298). (Elda and Ruben represent . . . the two weakest and most abject beings in ancient society: the woman and the slave, rehabilitated only by Christianity). For Avellaneda, if Christianity can restore the rights of society's

most abject, the Bible can provide witness to woman's intrinsic value and dispel the myth that discrimination against women is God-ordained.

It is not entirely surprising, then, that Avellaneda states in no uncertain terms that she will cast aside well-established traditions of human mediators in favor of God's divine revelation to her personally and directly, and her own biblical exegesis. In a prayer found in her 1847 devotional manual, Avellaneda writes: "No son ya, Dios mío, vuestros inspirados profetas; no son vuestros apóstoles los que me instruyen en mi deber: es vuestro Eterno Verbo, que se digna comunicarse con sus criaturas. Hablad, Señor; hablad, que vuestra sierva escucha" (*Manual* 52).⁶ (It is not, my God, your inspired prophets nor your apostles who instruct me of my duty, it is your Eternal Word that deigns to communicate with your creatures. Speak, Lord, speak, for your servant is listening.)⁷ Avellaneda expresses this sentiment again in her essay entitled "Nuevo mes de María":

Declaremos aquí nuestra firme resolución de seguir el dictamen de . . . rechazar, respecto a obras religiosas, todo adorno fundado en hipótesis; toda aseveración cuyo cimiento no sea sólido. Haremos más: prescindiremos hasta de muy autorizadas tradiciones, examinando la más elevada de las personalidades humanas,⁸ sólo por los rasgos con que nos la presentan las Sagradas Escrituras. (reprinted in Alzaga 363)

Let us declare here our firm resolution to follow the dictum of . . . rejecting, with respect to religious works, all adornment based on hypothesis; all assertions whose foundation may not be solid. We will do more: we will get rid of even the authorized traditions, examining the most lofty of humans, only for the characteristics that are presented to us in the Holy Scriptures.

It is important to note, however, that Avellaneda explores these issues and pushes the boundaries from within Catholic orthodoxy. In Rosemary Radford Ruether's words, "It is women operating from a stance of 'radical obedience' rather than dissent who are likely to make the greater impact on their male colleagues, for their claims cannot be so easily rejected" (*Sexism* 19). This is certainly true in the case of one of her contemporary critics as well as that of the censor of the *Devocionario*. An article containing com-

mentary by one of Avellaneda's contemporaries on her 1867 *Devocionario*, stated that religious texts in nineteenth-century Spain did not measure up to secular literature; they tended to be rigid, error-ridden, or banal (article quoted in Alzaga 323).⁹ But that critic found Avellaneda's attempt at religious literature to be a grand exception and viewed her devotional as "truly inspired." The censor of the *Devocionario*, who gave his official stamp of approval, made similar comments, praising the text's literary merit as above that of the other devotionals circulating at the time. He claimed that even the most indifferent reader would be inspired by the beautiful poetry:

Este Devocionario . . . es notable por su mérito literario, siendo bellísimas las muchas composiciones poéticas que contiene, lo que hará que, aun buscado bajo este solo concepto, produzca el gran beneficio de inspirar la piedad a las personas más indiferentes. Bajo todos conceptos, excede en mérito este precioso libro á cuantos devocionarios circulan hoy en España entre los fieles. (*Devocionario* 1867)

This Devotional . . . is noteworthy for its literary merit. Its many beautiful poetic compositions in their own right will produce the great benefit of inspiring piety in even the most indifferent people. In every respect, this beautiful book surpasses in merit the many devotionals circulating among the faithful in Spain today.

Avellaneda herself acknowledges the abundance of devotionals, and begins the prologue to her 1847 *Manual* with a dose of unsurprising, self-deprecating comments typical of the era:

Al dar a la luz una obra del género de la presente, después de tantas como ha producido en estos últimos tiempos la piedad de los españoles, y de las no menos numerosas con que nos ha abastecido el reino vecino, no me atrevería a esperar para mi libro una preferencia que hoy reclamo, si sólo considerase en él la pequeñez del mérito que mi humilde talento hubiera podido prestarle. (21)

Upon giving birth to a work of this genre, especially after the many [devotionals] produced recently by Spanish piety, and after the numerous volumes that the neighboring kingdom [France] has supplied us with, I wouldn't dare hope that my book be preferred over the others, but that the slightest bit of

merit that my humble talent has been able to render it will be considered.

Her self-deprecation is short-lived, however, and her comments quickly become an affirmation of the merits and distinctiveness of her text, emphasizing its simple style and clarity:

Creo, empero, que justificaré suficientemente mi ambición, al advertir al público que la obra que le presento y recomiendo, como no indigna de su particular aprecio, reúne en su pequeño volumen lo mejor que, a mi modo de ver, se encuentra esparcido en muchas de su clase de las más notables, conteniendo además algunas breves, pero importantes instrucciones sobre el augusto sacrificio de la Misa, y los Sacramentos de la Confesión y Comunión: instrucciones escritas con sencillez y claridad teniendo a la vista eminentes autores católicos que han tratado detenidamente asuntos tan santos. (21)

I believe, nevertheless, that I will sufficiently justify my ambition, upon advising the public that the work I present and recommend to them is not unworthy of their personal esteem, for it gathers together in this small volume the best that, in my opinion, is found scattered throughout the best known books of this kind. It also contains some brief but very important instructions about the illustrious sacrifice of the Mass, and the Sacraments of Confession and Communion: simple and clearly written instructions keeping in mind the eminent Catholic authors that have so carefully dealt with these sacred matters.

Like Isabel de Jesús, and many other women writers of religious texts, Avellaneda's prologue makes a "discursive transition from humble ignorance to religious knowledge" (Arenal and Schlau 218). While she affirms her expertise as a scholar in theological matters, "[s]uch a strategy of self-effacement was a necessary counterweight to the amazing claim of comprehension" (Arenal and Schlau 218). Avellaneda has taken the complex theological texts of "eminent Catholic authors" and has converted them into an accessible text in which she instructs her readers on how to pray and how to conduct daily religious activities. Her devotional includes the unencumbered prayers and daily exercises that, as she states, all Christians should practice:

No faltan tampoco en este devocionario las oraciones o

ejercicios cotidianos que debe practicar todo cristiano; y los he dispuesto según las inspiraciones de mi corazón, descargándolos de aquella exuberante afluencia de palabras que suele notarse en la mayor parte de los que se hallan en obras como la presente; porque en mi sentir la sencillez y la sobriedad son cualidades indispensables de la sincera, sentida y humilde plegaria, que a su Creador dirija la criatura. (21-22)

This devotional does not leave out the prayers and daily exercises that all Christians should practice; and I have included them according to the inspirations of my heart, freeing them from the verbosity so typical of the majority of works such as this; because in my opinion simplicity and restraint are indispensable qualities of the sincere, heartfelt and humble prayer that one may address to the Creator.

Avellaneda is scholar, teacher, a priest of sorts, and her authority comes from God. She does not hesitate to serve as a spokesperson for divine instructions: “Nuestro Divino Maestro nos ha advertido por su mismo labio, que no es la abundancia de las palabras la que hace aceptar la oración, y que el culto que él vino a establecer en la tierra, es un culto en espíritu y en verdad” (22). (Our Divine Teacher has advised us from his own lips that it is not the abundance of words that makes a prayer acceptable, and that the worship that He came to establish on earth is a worship in spirit and in truth.)

Further along in the prologue she establishes that her poetic contributions in this devotional reflect a great effort on her part to elevate the inferior quality of those songs and poems held dear by the Church:

La autora no ha olvidado ninguno de aquellos bellísimos cantos de la Iglesia que han sido traducidos y versificados, comúnmente con sobrado descuido o con poca ventura. Acaso esta nueva versión no sea más feliz que sus anteriores, pero al menos he deseado que lo fuese y he hecho cuanto de mí dependía para lograrlo. (22)

The author has not forgotten any of the beautiful songs of the Church that have been translated and put into verse, often with great carelessness or negligence. Perhaps this new version will not be better than those that preceded it, but at least I have desired that it be so and I have done all that I could to achieve that.

In writing about convent women's texts in Golden Age Spain, Arenal and Schlau affirm "the need to open up definitions of intellectuality in a way which allows us to recognize these women's contributions to the creation of a culture of their communities" (214) for their contributions "often lay outside the male intellectual sphere" (214). "Affect, dream, intuition, and inspiration, realms to which women were largely confined in any case, became vehicles for knowing" (Arenal and Schlau 214). In her prologue, Avellaneda affirms what are typically considered female ways of knowing. As seen above, the daily exercises in which all Christians should participate are determined by the author "according to the inspirations of my heart" (22). Moreover, she affirms the value of love over reason, especially in relation to the numerous poems contained in the devotional: "La razón, ha dicho un escritor distinguido, no puede más que hablar, pero el amor, canta" (22).¹⁰ (A distinguished writer has said that reason can only speak, but love sings.) She realizes the audacity in rewriting patristic literature, and carefully justifies her work emphasizing the care with which she undertook it and her respect for not crossing the line:

. . . y no solamente me he atrevido a versificar salmos y cánticos sagrados, muy conocidos, ya improvisando himnos originales; sino que también he tratado de conseguir la parte poética de algunos rezos populares; en cuanto era posible, sin ahogar su sentido literal, ni dar margen a que se me atribuyese deseo de innovaciones peligrosas, tratándose de ejercicios adoptados por la Iglesia y tan usados por todos los fieles. (22-23)

. . . and I have not only dared to put into verse well known psalms and sacred songs, improvising original hymns; but I have also tried to capture the poetic part of some popular prayers; to the extent possible, without drowning out the literal meaning, nor leaving room for attributing to me leanings toward dangerous innovations, dealing as they do with practices adopted by the Church and used by all of the faithful.

Theology, biblical exegesis, and other apostolic privileges belonged solely to the male domain, but Avellaneda masterfully engages in and alters this discourse with the blessings of the ecclesiastical censors.

In the closing paragraph of the prologue to the *Manual* Avellaneda's authority is established in three ways: by her tears, by the uniting of her words with those of the prophets found in the Scriptures, and by God:

¡Feliz yo si haciendo uso de estas páginas, humedecidas muchas veces con mis lágrimas, algún corazón afligido, siente brotar de ellas un santo destello de la fe consoladora que se insinuó en mi alma por providenciales vías: de aquella luz que brilla para los que están en las tinieblas; y que cantó el profeta, penetrado de reconocimiento en las palabras sublimes que repite con él la autora de este libro, dando humilde testimonio de la verdad que contienen. Me he dirigido a mi Dios y la calma y la consolación han renacido al punto en el fondo de mi alma. (23)

Happy am I if by making use of these pages, moistened many times with my tears, some afflicted heart will feel springing forth from them a holy glimmer of consoling faith that gradually worked its way into my soul by providential paths: from the light that shines for those in the darkness; and from the song of the prophet, penetrated by the acknowledgement in the sublime words that the author of this book repeats with him, giving humble testimony to the truth that they contain. I have addressed myself to my God, and calm and consolation have been reborn in the deepest part of my soul.

The prologue would not be complete without mention of the tears Avellaneda shed on the pages as she wrote this devotional. “Tears were themselves condition and proof of psychic malleability. Repentance created a condition in which the person was vulnerable to suggestion, willing to exchange the patchwork of ordinary existence which by now appears pitifully shabby for the new religious interpretation of experience” (Miles 91). Avellaneda’s contemporaries and the critics that followed have subjected her to great criticisms for the lifestyle she led and the company she kept.¹¹ Her personal faith commitments were called into question and needed to be proven. “Marcelline Pauper, one of the first Sisters of Charity of Nevers in the first half of the nineteenth century, writes of being comforted by the divine gift of tears which flooded her prayers, proof of holy union with the divine” (De Giorgio 188). In like manner, Avellaneda’s tears served as evidence of repentance and proof of union with God.

For those who may doubt the universality of Avellaneda’s text, she contends that her words are echoed in the voice of the prophet; she repeats with him the “sublime words” to give testimony to the truthfulness contained therein. “The strategy employed by most theologians of the past to mask their

innovations was their claim to be simply identifying the ‘true’ Christianity” (Miles 12). Furthermore, “[h]istorical authors in the Christian traditions frequently claimed a God’s-eye view based on scriptural or ecclesiastical authority” (Miles 12). The authority bestowed upon her text by her tears and the text’s consonance with the words of the prophet in the Scriptures is further validated by Avellaneda with the peaceful union she has with God.¹²

The Virgin Mary and the Nineteenth-Century Feminine Script

With regard to Catholic orthodoxy, the most obvious stumbling block to the Protestant reader of Avellaneda’s devotionals is perhaps her contribution to the discourse perpetuating the cult of Mary. The nineteenth century marks the regeneration of the Virgin Mary, in both popular and official realms, throughout the Catholic world. “Indeed, so great was this revival that leaders of the [Catholic] church call the years between 1850 and 1950 the Marian Age” (Pope 173). Jaroslav Pelikan, who has traced Mary’s place in the history of culture through the centuries, writes that “the Virgin Mary has been the subject of more thought and discussion about what it means to be a woman than any other woman in Western history. To an extent that many have chosen to ignore, explanations about Mary or portraits of her in words or in pictures can tell us much about how ‘the feminine’ has been perceived” (219). This aspect of Mary has captured the attention of religious and secular feminists alike. Those raised with the mistrust and disparagement of Mary so typical of North American Protestantism may question what made the Virgin Mary so attractive to Avellaneda. Page after page of both devotionals paint verbal pictures of the Virgin Mary that echo Catholic traditions in their portrayal of her saintly attributes but, at the same time, create a unique place for a new definition of the feminine within the orthodox faith.

The interpretations of just how much or how little Mary’s images throughout the ages have helped or hindered women’s lives are multifaceted and the subject of much speculation. The controversy over her role in shaping women’s lives is far from settled. Views range from passionate convictions that Mary was merely one of many tools within the patriarchal church to insure women’s continuing inferior status, to insistence that identification with Mary indeed has facilitated the empowerment of women. Avellaneda clearly falls within the latter group.

While the *Manual* presents hymns, prayers and poems to and about the Virgin, the most direct and strongly written defense of the cult of the Vir-

gin itself is found in a prose section some two-thirds of the way through.¹³ In this passage Avellaneda claims that the mere longevity of the cult itself serves as a witness to the Virgin's worthiness of veneration:

La Iglesia ha proclamado altamente que todo honor, menos la adoración suprema, es debido a la *Virgen llena de gracia*, y así lo prueba la generalidad y antigüedad de su culto, que ha triunfado de los más violentos ataques para llegar a nuestros días con el mismo calor y la misma poesía con que lo vemos nacer en los primeros tiempos del Cristianismo. (180)

The Church has proclaimed highly that all honor, with the exception of supreme adoration, is owed to the *Virgin full of grace*, and this is proved by the widespread and ancient cult that has triumphed over the most violent attacks to arrive in our day with the same warmth and the same poetry with which we saw it born in the early days of Christianity.

Avellaneda traces the cult's history in a poetic manner, through Greece, Rome, and amongst Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Goths, and Lombards, where Marian devotion "se extendió triunfante" (spread triumphantly, 181-182). In the Middle Ages, Mary's name became a battle cry; great military feats were carried out in her name, and her name was defended by the sword: "No había caballero que no se hallase dispuesto a romper lanzas contra cualquiera que pusiere en duda los altos privilegios de María" (*Manual* 182). (There was not a single nobleman unprepared to defend her against anyone who would cast doubt upon the high privileges of Mary.) She would become an image on the banners carried into combat against the Moors, and from which the Turkish galleys would flee in Lepanto (182). Just as God was "Dios de los ejércitos" (God of the armies), "La Madre de Dios reinaba sobre las armadas como sobre los ejércitos, y presidía los consejos de los tronos como los de las repúblicas" (*Manual* 182). (The Mother of God reigned over the naval forces just as she did over the armies, and presided over the councils of the thrones and the republics.) Avellaneda writes that even the "ignorant savages"¹⁴ at the time of the Conquest constructed temples and adorned chapels dedicated to the Virgin, all done with the skill of great architects, sculptors and painters. On the other side of the world, Chinese women would send flowers and perfume to the Christian missionaries for this "Glorious Mother", and the "Gran Lama" even erected a church in her name.

Avellaneda claims that the reason why this cult has survived for so long, and the reason it will persist, is that it has been a wellspring of inspiration for the arts: “Reina de los dolores y de las glorias, María es el tipo cristiano que ha buscado el artista, evocando todas las bellezas del mundo ideal” (*Manual* 183) (Queen of sorrows and of glories, Mary is the Christian figure whom the artist has sought, evoking all of the beauties of the ideal world). None of the Greek deities can compare, says Avellaneda. Moreover, “Dios ha creado las flores para adornar la tierra, dicen los hebreos; la religión cultiva las artes, que son las flores de la inteligencia, y el culto de María ha ejercido en ellas una influencia que sería imposible desconocer” (*Manual* 184) (God has created all of the flowers to adorn the earth, the Hebrews say; religion cultivates the arts, which are flowers of intelligence, and the cult of Mary has exercised an influence on them that would be impossible to ignore). Art, music, architecture and literature, “Las artes todas han sentido la suave influencia del culto de María” (*Manual* 186) (All of the arts have felt the gentle influence of the cult of Mary). The images of Mary that Avellaneda presents here not only defend her influence worldwide, but, more importantly, evoke her in decidedly male realms. She is presiding over battles and politics, while at the same time inspiring artistic expression.

Avellaneda concludes the section on the cult of Mary with her poem, “Al dulce nombre de María” (To the Sweet Name of Mary). The title, rendering a traditionally feminine attribute of the Virgin, does not betray the mixture of masculine and feminine images that follows. Her name is “dulce” (sweet), but in addition to possessing passive attributes [she is called “nombre que escucha” (name that listens)], she is also portrayed using active images: “nombre que restaura” (name that restores), “nombre que al bueno electriza” (name that electrifies the good). In her complexity she is beyond being captured in poetry or nature:

Pues es tu hechizo más fuerte
y tu son es más suave
que el dulce canto del ave
que fuerte la voz del mar. (*Manual* 221)

For your enchantment is stronger
and your word is softer
than the sweet song of the bird
than the strong voice of the sea.

Avellaneda wants to protect the Virgin from the world’s lies, and pro-

claims that her own faithfulness to the Virgin is enduring: “en la noche y en el día, // *María* y siempre *María*, // oírás en mi labio sonar” (day and night, // *Mary* always *Mary*, // you will hear sound from my lips) (221).

Interestingly in this poem, Avellaneda meshes traditional binary oppositions to create an image of the Virgin as “dulce y potente” (sweet and powerful), a tender mother and a strong shield, one who listens and who acts. It is hard, if not impossible, to leave the feminine and the masculine behind under patriarchy, but one clearly senses a vague freedom and certain delight in the way in which Avellaneda constructs the Virgin. Rosemary Radford Ruether believes that both masculinity and femininity as traditionally defined represent different types of alienation of humanity from its original potential, and neither discloses an innately good human nature nor an expression of evil. She cautions women against identifying themselves with those repressed parts of the male psyche that males have projected upon them as “feminine,” and encourages them instead to critique both male psychic dualism and male sociological dualism in order to transform both psychic capacities and social roles. (*Sexism* 112-113) Through androgyny, men gain their “feminine” side, but women can only represent the “feminine,” “which means exclusion from the exercise of roles of power and leadership associated with masculinity” (Ruether, *Sexism* 130). It is when women seek psychic and sociological integration rather than psychic and sociological dualism, according to Ruether, that they begin to overcome the schizophrenia of mind and of society.

Women want to integrate the public and the private, the political and the domestic spheres in a new relationship that allows the thinking-relational self to operate throughout human life as one integrated self, rather than fragmenting the psyche across a series of different social roles. Women want to tear down the walls that separate the self and society into ‘male’ and ‘female’ spheres. (Ruether, *Sexism* 113)

This desire to show the Virgin Mary as an integrated self functioning in a variety of social roles and in spheres traditionally male as well as female is clear in Avellaneda’s portrayal of the Virgin. Avellaneda obviously feels a deep personal connection to Mary, whom she calls “mi bienhechora” (my benefactress), “mi abogada” (my advocate), “mi más fiel y antigua amiga” (my most faithful and oldest friend, *Devocionario* 108) and whom, in the 1867 version of “Canto al dulce nombre de María,” she calls “Madre poderosa”

(powerful Mother) and “Fuente de poesía” (Fountain of poetry), declaring: “vuestro alto nombre y su poder admiro” (your high name and your power I admire, *Devocionario* 111). While church teachings were encouraging women and young girls to esteem and emulate the Virgin’s humility, submissiveness, and chastity, Avellaneda was paying eloquent tribute to the Virgin’s power. Carolyn Heilbrun writes: “The true representation of power is not of a big man beating a smaller man or woman. Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter. This is true in the Pentagon, in marriage, in friendship, and in politics” (Heilbrun 18). Power and control have always been declared unwomanly, as Heilbrun explains, and so “[t]he woman’s movement began, in fact, with discussions of power, powerlessness, and the question of sexual politics” (17).

In Avellaneda’s commentary, we see that her commitment to Mary is so compelling that for her “the religious system and its sacred institutions” would be at stake if the cult of the Virgin were to be tampered with (*Manual* 179). While this defense of the cult appears to be protective of the very patriarchal institutions that so frustrated Avellaneda throughout her life, we see that she felt that women’s gains in the world of sexual politics were in jeopardy if the embodiment of the eternal feminine were compromised and the “female imagery and language about the holy mystery of God” were obliterated (Kirk 59).¹⁵ Avellaneda saw in or projected onto the Virgin the very images of womanhood that marked her own life. In the Virgin she finds not only inspiration to pursue her literary talents, but also affirmation that a woman can legitimately display power and strength, and even participate in the political realm, yet still be “sweet,” “tender,” “chaste,” and “soft” as we see in “El dulce nombre de María” (*Devocionario* 111).

God and the Nineteenth-Century Masculine Script

If Avellaneda’s need to defend and honor Mary, embodiment of the eternal feminine, is rooted in part in a need to legitimize her own artistic and intellectual capacities, assessing Avellaneda’s depiction of God in her two manuals of devotion may be significant in defining Avellaneda’s views of masculinity. We see very clearly in her *Manual* many of the very traditional portrayals of God—from Creator and Liberator to Lawgiver and Judge. Hugh Harter reminds us that in her poem “Dedicación de mi lira a Dios” Avellaneda “envisions God as the source of poetry and beauty in nature, of harmony, and of genius” (Harter 73). And in her prologue to the *Manual*, Avellaneda again affirms the essential link between her personal connection with God and the

religious poetry she creates (22).

Despite the various feminine characteristics she ascribes to God, the God of Avellaneda is essentially male. Avellaneda predominately employs male language for the divine, and does not dare to insist on God's motherhood as well as fatherhood. Instead, we see in her texts a transcendent, immortal male deity who is portrayed throughout in a variety of roles, not the least of which is as an indulgent and loving father (*Manual* 101). The feminine imagery used for God, however, is limited to several poems inspired by the Psalms and Isaiah (*Manual* 77).

The great patriarch in heaven used to justify male domination and protect the status quo is transformed, however, by Avellaneda into a God who gives her the authority to critique the institutions defined by men (including slavery and sexism) and to live as she does. The parent-child relationship is apparent, but does not make her desire for autonomy a sinful act. Though God's judgment frequently sends her in search of the verbal intervention of the Virgin Mary, his compassion and mercy are not minimized. The masculinity of God, then, encompasses a broad range of characteristics very different from the dominant masculine script for nineteenth-century manhood.

Language and Female Subjectivity

While most traditional devotional manuals assume a universalized male perspective, Avellaneda experiments with language in an unprecedented manner, often using inclusive language and also switching between masculine and feminine subjects. "The most rudimentary gender analysis, when applied to traditional devotional manuals, shows that women have been treated either as disembodied souls or as bodies, dangerous objects that incite male lust. The most popular manuals were written by men and, as we could have predicted, they display unexamined gender assumptions and attitudes" (Miles 82). Avellaneda's devotionals, however, reflect a heightened awareness of gender issues. She gave the female voice a subjectivity that ran counter to traditional manuals in which "[w]omen were the objects rather than the subjects of the practice of Christianity" (Miles 82). Interestingly, the dominant narrative voice of the *Manual* is the feminine "yo" (I), while the dominant narrative voice of the *Devocionario* is the masculine "yo." It may appear that Avellaneda became more conservative as she matured, using the masculine "I" as the universal form. After all, when she wrote the *Manual*, she was thirty-two years old. She published the *Devocionario* when she was fifty-three. In one instance she does use the feminine plural to refer to the users of

the *Manual*: “Pueden hacerlo las que usen este devocionario. . .” (36, emphasis mine) (This can be done by those [feminine] who use this devotional). Though this may be used to argue that the *Manual* was written strictly for use by women, Avellaneda states in no uncertain terms, as we have seen above, that the prayers and practices are for *all* Christians. Moreover, the title itself calls into question the conclusion that the intended readers are women. *Manual del cristiano* either implies a male reader or both male and female readers, as the masculine singular was and is still often used with the intention of including both sexes.

The feminine narrative voice is first seen in the *Manual* in “Oración a nuestro señor Jesucristo” (Prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ) where the narrator states: “aquí me tenéis postrada a vuestros pies” (28) (here you have me prostrate [feminine adjective] at your feet) . The feminine voice affirms that woman is capable of understanding sublime lessons: “¿Podré comprender yo, ¡oh soberano maestro!, vuestras sublimes lecciones? Sí, Jesús mío . . .” (52) (Will I understand, oh sovereign teacher!, your sublime lessons? Yes, my Jesus). The feminine voice asks for and affirms the intellectual capacities of woman: “Dad a vuestra sierva la inteligencia para que comprenda . . . Instruídme en vuestras santas máximas y enseñadme a ejecutarlas” (Give to your servant [feminine] the intelligence to understand . . . Instruct me in your holy maxims and teach me to execute them) (74), and also asks that “la inteligencia de vuestra palabra . . . penetre en mi corazón y que sea constantemente el objeto de mis deseos y la regla de mi conducta” (52) (the intelligence of your word. . . penetrate my heart and that it constantly be the object of my desires and the pattern for my conduct).

Avellaneda’s *Manual* is filled with a constant alternating and juxtapositioning of masculine and feminine narrative voices, as well as male and female biblical figures. As Grace Jantzen writes:

Only rarely did women writers break out of the linguistic conventions which reflected the normativity of maleness . . . Nevertheless, the fact that women . . . found the courage and the resources of imagination to develop female imagery at all, and to reconceptualize God from female experience, shows a strong need to push back the boundaries of thought and language to include women in an honoured place. (290-291)

In contrast to the feminine narrative voice dominating the *Manual*,

Avellaneda writes using a masculine narrative voice in much of the *Devocionario* of 1867. As we have seen, even the male ecclesiastical censor was impressed with its literary quality, and his comments make clear the text's perceived value to men. Avellaneda specifically states that the *Devocionario* "sólo fue escrito para nuestro uso particular" (8) ("only was written for our personal use") a limitation she does not explicitly place on the *Manual*. Although her use of the feminine narrative voice in the first devotional may not be considered radical if its intended readers are exclusively female, her rewriting of the Scriptures using the feminine narrative voice certainly was, as was giving credence to female subjectivity in the written text as well as in the spiritual quest. The male reader likely would assume that his omission from the text was cause for dismissing it entirely. Women, in contrast, have been trained throughout history to read the male narrative voice and appropriate its application in their lives. It is perhaps precisely because of this that Avellaneda deliberately uses the male narrative voice in the *Devocionario*, not to acquiesce to sexist language nor to reinforce that the normative Christian is distinctively male, but rather to insure that her text cannot be dismissed by the male reader due to its use of the feminine narrative voice. While her usage of the feminine "I" may be read as an affirmation of women's subjectivity, her usage of the masculine "I" is not necessarily an antifeminist statement. The reader must keep in mind that the author of this masculine "I" is, after all, a woman.

In her prologue to the *Manual*, Avellaneda acknowledges her audacity in rewriting patristic literature, and carefully justifies her work, emphasizing the care with which she undertook it and her respect for not crossing the line. Theology, biblical exegesis, and other apostolic privileges belonged solely to the male domain, but Avellaneda masterfully engages in and alters this discourse showing a unique sensitivity to gender construction — with the blessings of Church and State. Her devotionals are indeed radical in their deviation from dominant scripts for manhood and womanhood in the nineteenth-century, as well as in their break with linguistic conventions reflecting maleness as normative. As we have seen, Avellaneda's faith does not capitulate to dominant Christian teachings on woman's innate inferiority. Her religious commitments are indisputably foundational to her struggle for political, social, and professional rights.

NOTES

¹ Grace M. Jantzen explains, "the Christian church never said (and never wished to

say) that women could not be saved. Quite the contrary: the Jesus movement and the early Christian missionary activity arguably offered one of the most radically egalitarian stances known in the ancient world, and sought the renunciation of every form of domination, whether based on sex, race or social class" (47-48).

² Jiménez Duque writes that devotional literature "abundaba hasta la saciedad" (111).

³ See Alzaga and Bravo-Villasante.

⁴ Though Erasmus deemed women a threat to male spirituality, Alison Weber reminds us that he defended women's right to study the Scriptures (21).

⁵ See for example the writings of bell hooks.

⁶ The parallels between Avellaneda's words and those of the prophet Samuel are quite obvious. More striking, however, is her use of the feminine noun for servant (*sierva*) which, as we will see later on, is one of numerous examples of Avellaneda's refusal to universalize the male narrative voice within the *Manual*. (See 1 Samuel 3:10.)

⁷ Because Avellaneda's devotional manuals have not yet been published in English, this and all subsequent translations are mine.

⁸ That is to say, Mary, mother of Jesus.

⁹ Though I have not been able to obtain a copy of the original article, Alzaga's text provides the following bibliographic information: León y Domínguez, "El Devocionario de la Sra. Da Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda", *El Domingo*, 1.5 (12 May): 1867. 66 ff.

¹⁰ Gómez de Avellaneda includes in a footnote the author of these words: "De Maistre en su obra titulada *Essai sur le princ. ge. etcétera*" (22).

¹¹ In 1914 Rodríguez García wrote of Avellaneda: "Su vida fué para el amor, el arte, la religión" (200). (She lived for love, art, and religion.) But he tells us that she was hurt by those who doubted the sincerity of her faith: "La mortificaba grandemente que no se creyera en su sinceridad religiosa" (200). (She was greatly mortified that her religious sincerity was questioned.) Avellaneda's religion has been called "otra borrachera" (another binge) (Portuondo), her drug (Banusch), and a "solace for her anguish and pain" (Harter). Moreover, the time she spent in the convent in Bordeaux has been called "un paréntesis místico" (a mystic parenthesis) (Cruz), "a feminist statement" (Miller), and a time to seek forgiveness for the unforgivable sin of bearing a child out of wedlock: "Mucho había pecado y aunque mucho había sufrido, muchísimo era lo que había de purgar y pagar" (Marquina 200). (She had sinned a lot and even though she had suffered, she had much for which to purify herself and pay.)

¹² The prologue to Gómez de Avellaneda's 1867 devotional addresses some of the same themes considered above, but does so in a much less personal manner. The use of the first person singular in the *Manual* and the first person plural in the *Devocionario* cannot help but contribute to this impression. In the *Devocionario* as

in the *Manual*, she affirms the use of simple and spontaneous prayers, and emphasizes the inclusion of Spain's most popular prayers in her devotional. But the prayers that she accused of being translated and put into verse "with great carelessness or negligence," and reworked to the best of her ability in the *Manual* are, in the *Devocionario*, revised only for what "la lógica, la gramática, el sentido común exigían como indispensables" (9) (logic, grammar, and common sense demand as indispensable). Regarding changes made to other prayers, Avellaneda states: "sólo diremos que dejamos al buen juicio de los lectores el explicarse el por qué hicimos esa mudanza" (10) (we will only say that we leave it to the good judgement of the readers to explain why we made that change). While the 1847 prologue reminds the reader of the tear-stained pages contained within, the 1867 *Devocionario* ends with an unemotional if not blithe request: "¡Así se acuerden también los que lo lean, y saquen algún provecho de su contenido, de rogar al Señor por la humilde Autora!" (10) (May those who read this remember and benefit from its content, upon praying to the Lord for its humble Author!).

¹³ Avellaneda bases much of this section on *Cristo ante el siglo, ó Nuevos testimonios de las ciencias en favor del catolicismo*, published in 1845, and written by Señor Abate Orsini, whom she mentions by name, and Count Roselly de Lorgues, whom she does not mention.

¹⁴ This racist portrayal of the indigenous reveals obvious complicity with predominant nineteenth-century European perspectives.

¹⁵ Pamela Kirk examines Marian piety in the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, emphasizing the positive implications for women's lives that Sor Juana found in Mary.

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