

The Integration of Religion and the Carnavalesque in “La abadesa preñada”

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Among the significant elements which comprise the framework for Gonzalo de Berceo’s 13th century *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, a central yet perhaps surprising theme is the role of the Virgin Mary, who, despite her explicit depiction as Mother of God, principal member of the Church, and Mediatrix of divine favors, consistently thwarts the reader’s expectations through her identification with the more vulgar aspect of the human condition, an aspect amply described in its medieval manifestation in Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. Throughout many of the tales presented in the *Milagros*, the expressions and actions of the Virgin Mary consistently reflect not only the religious, ecclesial aspect of medieval culture, an aspect which relentlessly emphasized a rejection of the material world and humanity’s ultimate inclination towards God, but likewise the carnivalesque reality of society, a cosmovision that traditionally set itself in opposition to all things official and regulatory, foremost among them the Church. While the presence and conflict of the spiritual and profane dimensions of the human experience within Berceo’s best known work is to be expected, given their prevalence within virtually all aspects of medieval life and thought, the double-characterization of Mary in the *Milagros* as the premier representative of both worldviews results in an imposing literary and cultural paradox. However, a tentative reconciliation to this incongruity can in fact be found in several of the miracle narratives, including “La abadesa preñada,” within which the character and actions of the Virgin Mary appear to bring about a sort of synthesis or transcendence of the conflict between the ecclesiastical and popular cultures of the Middle Ages, and thus an integration of the divine and carnal inclinations of humanity.

Gonzalo de Berceo, author of the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, has been recognized as “una de las personalidades poéticas más interesantes de toda la literatura medieval española... un maestro de las técnicas y estructuras de la literatura didáctica” (Gerli, 14). He is known to have received an advanced intellectual formation (Dutton, 254), and is characterized as a “learned teacher who understood well the theological doctrines of his time and who knew how to use his learning in the creation of a text” (Poole, 84), as well as one whose works reflect the complexity of the political, theological, economic, didactic, and pious concerns of the author and his world (Gerli, 12-13). In other words, Berceo was no simple cleric (Rico Mansilla), but rather “un publicista que escribe sus obras con un afán propagandista; un cristiano bien informado; un teólogo; un catequista; un autor de las glorias de María” (Ruiz Domínguez), and therefore a sophisticated, intelligent, and religious individual. His most recognized work, the *Milagros*, was published around the year 1250 with the dual objective of monastic advertisement and pious Marian devotion (Rico Mansilla) and is composed of a lengthy introduction and twenty-five poetic “cuentos,” or brief stories, which recount various popular narratives regarding the miraculous intervention of the Virgin Mary. Despite the fact that the *Milagros* is composed of a variety of seemingly unconnected narratives, at the foundation of the work “está la idea central de las maravillas que Dios ha obrado en María como síntesis anticipada de la Historia de la salvación y de las que de continuo a través de Ella obra” (García de la Concha). In other words, the action of the miracle, together with the figure of the Virgin Mary as miracle-worker, combine to serve as the thematic base which unites and gives ineligibility to the *Milagros* as a whole. An analysis of the actions and character of Mary throughout the text thus clarifies one of the central themes of the *Milagros*: the tumultuous interaction between the spiritual and carnal dimensions of medieval

life, an interaction whose conflict is often mediated and resolved by the Virgin Mary. Additionally, Michael Gerli notes that:

Se evidencia que Berceo organiza su obra según un esquema que evoca el amplio tipo bíblico de la Caída y Redención del Hombre [...] El *buen aveniment* que menciona Berceo en la primera cuaderna tiene grandes implicaciones doctrinales y humanas, puesto que se refiere metafóricamente [...] a la salvación universal del Pecado Original a través de Cristo, y, sobre todo, al instrumento de su encarnación, su madre la Virgen Maria. (37)

In other words, Berceo's *Milagros* focuses on the history of humanity's salvation and therefore on the divinization and carnivalization of the individual, two aspects of the human experience that were traditionally placed in conflict within the theological, cultural, and literary spheres of the Middle Ages, which often understood "la historia del mundo y la vida de cada hombre dentro de ella como una gran batalla entre Dios y el Demonio" (Garcia de la Concha). In summary, the central conflict of the *Milagros*, and thus by extension "La abadesa preñada," can be found in the interaction between the divine and material spheres of the human condition; thus, both the religious and the carnival dimensions of medieval culture can be considered as essential elements of the text, especially inasmuch as they relate to the Virgin Mary.

I

To begin, the religious dimension of the human experience is integral to the construction and plot of the *Milagros* in general, and thus likewise to "La abadesa preñada." The 'divine' element of medieval culture, whose central presence throughout the text is explicitly noted first and foremost in the work's name, is expressed most clearly through two principal elements: Marian theology, especially in its relation to soteriology, and the expression of this relationship through Biblical typology. In reference to the former, Gerli defines Mariology as the Church's understanding of Mary as "el canal de la gracia divina y el mejor camino hacia Dios. Si Cristo es la fuente de la vida, las aguas redentoras de la fuente, que son la gracias, llegan a nosotros por medio del siempre pleno acueducto que es su Madre" (21). In other words, through the intercession of Mary, humanity is more easily able to arrive at its eternal fulfillment in God; thus, Mary is intrinsically connected to salvation. The medieval understanding of the elemental role of Mary in humanity's redemption resulted in a massive surge in popular devotion to the mother of Christ throughout Spain in the 11th century and beyond (Burkhard, 24), and Gerli recognizes this same religious and cultural sentiment as fundamentally present in the *Milagros*:

Si en la Introducción se ejemplifica por medio de *figurae* la Historia Universal de Hombre, en los milagros que la siguen, se presenta la historia individual [...] Los personajes [...] encarnan y aproximan al público de Berceo el concepto de la gracias y redención y el valor de la peregrinación marianas. (46)

Gerli's reference to the exemplification of the universal human experience by means of 'figurae' in his introduction to the *Milagros* introduces the second key element of the medieval religious dimension presented by Berceo: the description of the humanity's religious sense (especially as it relates to salvation and Mariology) as it is depicted through Biblical typology. According to Cynthia Hamlin's explanation of Biblical typology,

el procedimiento tipológico hunde sus raíces en la concepción propiamente cristiana de la historia según la cual Dios es el gran autor del Libro del mundo y dispone las cosas y los acontecimientos a modo de signo, confiriéndoles un sentido en relación a la encarnación y redención de Cristo. (373)

Additionally, Gerli notes that “durante toda la Edad Media se desarrolló [...] una tipología en que se simbolizaba la historia universal del hombre desde su Caída hasta su Redención” (37). Such a typology included an identification of Mary as the new Eve, whose participation in God’s salvific plan helps redeem humankind from the sin of the original Eve (20). He likewise affirms the presence of Biblical typology throughout the entirety of the *Milagros* (43), and furthermore notes that an “análisis tipológico de [...] los *Milagros* de Berceo revela que el pecado, la redención y la gracia mariana son las ideas subyacentes que unen y estructuran la obra entera” (47). Therefore, it follows that the typological connections within the *Milagros* serve as “un intricado y coherente sistema de asociaciones que unifica, estructura y presta sentido no solo a [...] la Introducción, sino al resto de la obra,” (Gerli, 37). In other words, the Biblical typology which undergirds the *Milagros* functions as a vehicle through which one is able to understand the role of Mary and her miraculous intervention in the story of human salvation. Thus, such typology, inasmuch as it reinforces and reveals the themes of Mary and of humanity’s struggle towards God, is an essential element of the *Milagros* and by extension, “La abadesa preñada.”

The presence of the religious sphere of medieval culture within “La abadesa preñada,” which recounts the story of a wise and pious abbess who becomes pregnant due to a grave sin, but by means of her humble prayer and the miraculous intervention of the Virgin receives the double miracle of a birth without pain and the restoration of her signs of virginity, is perhaps most starkly evidenced through its basic plot: the salvation of a religious sister through the miraculous actions of the Mother of God. In fact, the redemption of humanity through the intervention of the Virgin Mary serves as the basic plot for nearly every ‘milagro’ narrative. Such a storyline is intrinsically tied to the religious dimension of the human experience, and thus reveals humanity’s inclination to God and the role of Mary in its divinization as a key theme of the work. The sacred element of “La abadesa preñada” is likewise manifested in the description of the ‘edad dorada,’ or golden age of Christianity, mentioned at the beginning of the poem, an age during which “corrié la verdat/ que no dicién oír nada, los omnes falsedat/[...] facié Dios por los omnes miráculos cutiano/ ca non querié ninguno, mentir a su christiano” (Berceo, stanzas 502-503). Additionally, Mary’s role in the fulfillment of humanity’s desire to be united with God and thus live eternally in the ‘golden age’ of heaven is made evident in the ‘salvation’ of the abbess from the effects of her sin through the central act of the text: the double-miracle enacted by Mary. This salvation is intimately connected with the abbess’ devotion to Mary, a devotion which, at her time of need, moves her to exclaim: “¡valme [...] Gloriosa, estrella de la mar/ ca non he nul consejo, que me pueda prestar/ [...] Señora benedicta, non te podi servir/ pero améte siempre, laudar e bendecir” (Berceo, stanza 522). Furthermore, it is a salvation that results in the literal reverse of the abbess’ signs of pregnancy (Berceo, stanza 537), a reversal which is also an eradication of the effects of her sin and a “restoration” of her original innocence. Berceo’s characterization of the abbess as one who forfeits and later regains her ‘innocence’ is likewise indicative of the Biblical typology that is quite prevalent throughout “La abadesa preñada,” especially in the characterization of the abbess as a ‘type’ of Eve and thus an ‘antitype’ of the Virgin. Helen Boreland states:

The pattern of sin and redemption is reflected in the account of the pregnant Abbess saved from disgrace by the Virgin. As a woman, the Abbess reminds us of [...] the sinner Eve [...] like Eve she sins in a far-off time, in a mythical Golden Age. (21)

The typological connection between the abbess and Eve is extended linguistically as well through the narrator's insinuation that the sin of the abbess brought about the end of the Christian paradise mentioned at the beginning of the poem, an insinuation which connects the forbidden fruit picked by Eve from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with the 'forbidden fruit' of the sin of the abbess, who broke her vow of chastity and "pisó por su ventura yerba fuert enconada" (Berceo, stanza 507), a 'plant' (or herb) from which 'grew' the 'mala fruta' of her illicit pregnancy and the increasing probability of her expulsion and subsequent disgrace. The restoration of the abbess' physical and spiritual 'innocence' by Mary, the spiritual mother of humanity, coupled with the abbess' identity as spiritual mother of her nuns and as a well-established type of Eve (the mother of fallen humanity whose role is likewise redeemed by Mary), further bolsters the typological relations established between the abbess, Eve, and Mary within "La abadesa preñada," relations through which Berceo weaves the religious aspect of medieval life and thought throughout the entirety of his work. In sum, an analysis of the presence of Marian theology and Biblical typology in "La abadesa preñada" clearly reveals the existence of the 'sacred' dimension of both the *Milagros* as a whole and of the medieval culture it represents.

II

However, as was already noted, the religious sphere of life during the time of Gonzalo de Berceo composed only one facet of the rich and diverse culture which thrived during the thirteenth century. The *Milagros* likewise manifests the material element of the fallen human, or better said, the carnivalesque aspect of humanity, a cultural reality that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, "was immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (4). The expression of this popular and profane aspect of the human condition often "remained outside official spheres, free from the hypocrisy and repressive violence that characterized medieval piety" (Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints: Parodies of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*, 4), and thus was situated in opposition to the religious-ecclesial sphere of medieval culture. In his excellent summary of the key elements of the carnivalesque impulse of humanity, Guillermo Garcia-Corales notes that:

El discurso carnavalesco revisa las estructuras hegemónicas de la sociedad y relativiza los paradigmas solemnes de autoridad y verdad al propiciar una visión del mundo a través de la inversión de jerarquías. Entonces la carnavalización acerca, compromete y conjuga lo sagrado con lo profano, lo grande con lo miserable, lo sabio con lo estúpido, lo central con lo marginal, lo banal con lo sofisticado y así sucesivamente permite a su vez confrontar el dilema entre la llamada cultura ilustrada y la popular en la creación artística, tema clave y muy contingente. (21)

Among the many aspects of the carnivalesque mentioned above, it is important to discern three fundamental components which underlie the conflict between the popular and ecclesial dimensions

of the human condition. First, it is worth noting that, for Bakhtin, the medieval carnival inverted the spiritual and mundane spheres of the human experience, and thus, according to Nekrashevich:

[...] allowed people to express themselves and united the profane with the sacred. Parodies on sacred texts were common during the Carnival times, and there was a heavy focus on reproduction. That which had been forbidden by the Church and by the general society were celebrated in Carnival. (18-19)

Second, along with the reversion of the sacred and the banal, carnivalesque culture also tended to reverse and subvert the structured authority of its epoch and promote disorder, subversion, and free expression; thus, through “the carnivalesque game of inverting official values [...] questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway” (Lachmann *et al.*, 118). As a result, dialogue was essential to the carnivalesque condition:

Bakhtin states how the authoritative word does not allow other forms of speech to interfere with it. Dialogue opposes the authoritative word, and this is compared to how Carnival opposes official culture. During Carnival time, hierarchy is halted, and the authoritative word becomes irrelevant. (Nekrashevich, 17)

Finally, the carnivalesque sphere tended to replace the hard inevitabilities of medieval reality with the ideals of utopia and myth. According to Bakhtin, carnival represented “the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (8); in other words, it concretely manifested a ‘golden age’ which included not only a destructive, grotesque aspect, but also a regenerative, life-giving one (Bakhtin, 21). In sum, one can understand the carnivalesque tendency towards the ideal, and thus its acceptance of the profane aspects of the human condition, as an expression of humanity’s inclination to overcome all boundaries and regulations and express itself freely and entirely.

Within the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, and specifically “La abadesa preñada,” the presence of the carnivalesque dimension of the human experience is made obvious first and foremost in Berceo’s use of the vernacular to transmit the miracle-stories, which were originally written in Latin. According to Gerli:

Quizá la diferencia más notable entre el relato de nuestro poeta y su fuente latín sea la del método de desarrollar la historia [...] la manera de contar en Berceo se destaca por su grado de dramatismo, fuerza estilística y coherencia formal. En la versión latina hay cuatro instancias mínimas en que los personajes intervienen hablando directamente, pero la de Berceo se desarrolla casi por completo en dialogo. (28)

In other words, rather than present the *Milagros* in Latin, the language of the clergy, the law, and thus the official culture of the times, Berceo composed his work in ‘romance,’ the vulgar language of much of medieval Spain. The presentation of the *Milagros* in the language of the common people not only fortifies the roles formerly attributed to Berceo of catechist, theologian, and popular poet, but just as importantly emphasizes and permits dialogue, an element already recognized as a central theme of medieval carnivalesque culture. In fact, according to Lachmann, “from Bakhtin’s point of view, the borderline between official and unofficial culture runs along the linguistic borderline between Latin and the vulgar language” (142-43). Furthermore, in addition to the simple use of the vernacular, Gerli mentions the incorporation of expressions and

stylistic elements associated with the popular ‘juglares’ within the *Milagros* (18), expressions which “evocaban contextos narrativos familiares que entusiasmaban y captaban la atención de un vasto público” (33). Thus, Berceo’s choice to write in the ‘common tongue’ represents an avenue by which the individual is able to enter, through dialogue, into the utopian expression of the carnivalesque sphere presented throughout the entirety of his narrative.

The presence of carnivalesque culture in “La abadesa preñada” is likewise evidenced in the inversion of religious authority with subversive carnality, an inversion manifested in the imperfections of various characters in the poem, including the abbess and her nuns. Firstly, the human impulse towards a reversal of ordered authority and its replacement with free, unencumbered expression is revealed in the efforts of the abbess’ subordinates to have her thrown out of the monastery. According to Hamlin, “el pecado de la abadesa ofrece una excusa a las monjas para deshacerse de su figura autoritaria e impone un cuestionamiento en el obispo acerca de su idoneidad para ejercer su cargo (tanto que será echada del convento)” (389). Therefore, when the nuns discover the grave sin of their abbess, “pesava a las unas, que era mal caída [...] / apremiávalas mucho, teniélas encerradas/ e non lis consintí, fer las cosas vedadas/ querien veerla muerta, las locas malfadadas/ [...] enbíaron al bispo” (Berceo, stanzas 508-511). The rebellion of the abbess’ subordinates, who are noted to be ‘mal caída’ and thus resentful of the restraints of their religious vows, clearly manifests a carnivalesque desire for an overthrow of authority and hence a “shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders” (Lachmann *et al.*, 124). In addition, the carnivalesque inversion of the sacred and banal elements of reality is manifested through Berceo’s identification of the abbess with the grotesque elements of fallen humanity. The simple fact of presenting a miracle whose theme is a fornicating nun clearly implies a carnivalesque presence, one which manifests:

Una confusión entre el mundo de los conventos y el mundo de la sexualidad pagana, corroborando así el reiterado tema medieval del popular juego de palabras con respecto a las “abadesas,” término que apelaba tanto a la superiora en la comunidad religiosa como a las protagonistas de [...] prostibularios. (Eduardo Barros-Grela, 202)

In fact, the carnivalesque ‘naming’ of a religious ‘milagro’ narrative is a theme throughout Berceo’s work, as is evidenced by the titles of miracles III (“El sacristán fornicario”), VI (“El ladrón devoto”), and XVII (“La iglesia de la Gloriosa profanada”), among others, all of which introduce explicitly religious components which are then inverted by the presence of a carnivalesque action or event. In “La abadesa preñada,” the carnivalesque characterization of the abbess is further developed through the physical consequences of her moral failing. Due to her sin, the abbess loses her virginity and replaces her role as spiritual mother with one as a physical mother, a reverse that is reflected in her body, “creciendo el vientre, en contra las terniellas [...] / ca enna primerizas, caen esta coiellas” (Berceo, stanza 508), and a change that results in the physical identification of the abbess with the carnivalesque body of fallen humanity, a body which is grotesque, but which also reveals the presence of new, regenerative life, given that “the grotesque image [of the carnivalesque body] reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (Bakhtin, 24). The abbess’ previously noted identification as a type of Eve, the mother of fallen humanity, thus shows itself to be not only a sign of the religious dimension of the human experience, but also of its banal sphere. Thus, the sin of the pregnant abbess clearly reflects the carnivalesque dimension of medieval life and society.

III

However, although the carnivalesque element of the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* is evident in the actions of the sinful abbess and her jealous nuns, the figure who perhaps most fully represents the culture of carnival is the most religious character as well: the Virgin Mary. The actions and expressions of the central figure of the *Milagros* consistently break through and overcome the rigidly structured stereotype of the medieval ecclesiastical culture, and thus reveal “the call of the Magnificat to bring down the mighty and empower the humble [...] a ‘carnivalization of rhetorical configurations’” (Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints*, 7). This carnivalesque dimension of the Virgin manifests itself in “La abadesa preñada” through the presence of multiple inversions of the religious with the banal and the real with the ideal, inversions effected by the intervening presence of Mary. To begin, the carnivalesque reversal of the sacred and the profane brought about by Mary, Mother of God and most perfect member of the Church (Riches, 241), manifests itself through the inversion of the religious imagery expressed through Biblical typology. As Gerli has already noted:

La pérdida y la restitución del Paraíso se expresan en la imaginación medieval ligando estrechamente los motivos simbólicos del jardín del Genesis [y por eso Eva] y los de la Anunciación de la Virgen, y muchas veces forman una dualidad que se presenta simultáneamente en una misma obra. (38)

This typology is likewise extended in “La abadesa preñada” with the identification of the abbess with Eve. However, according to Hamlin, “en este milagro se realiza [...] una doble construcción tipológica” (374); the abbess is identified not only with Eve, but also “postfigura a María, pero lo hace de manera imperfecta e invertida” (Hamlin, 389), which is to say, in a carnivalesque manner. This typological identification between Mary and the abbess is the result of the double miracle of the Virgin, a miracle which causes a miraculous birth, “non sintiendo la madre, de dolor nulla cosa/ nació la creatura, cosielle muy hermosa” (Berceo, stanza 533), and the restoration of the signs of the virginity of the abbess, two key elements in the narration of the Nativity as well, which recounts the story of the scandalous yet miraculous pregnancy of Mary who, according to Christian tradition, remained a Virgin after the birth of Christ. In other words:

The Abbess, like the Virgin, gives birth without any pain [...] and after the birth the Abbess shows no sign that she has ever been pregnant [...] this description also recalls the Virgin's miraculous virginity *postpartum*, which [...] may betray the fact that Berceo is consciously or unconsciously recalling the circumstances of the Nativity. (Boreland, 23-24)

Thus, the typological relation between the stories and persons of Mary and the abbess, a relation which jumbles the profane and the sacred and which occurs through the actions of Mary, clearly reveals the Virgin's participation in the carnivalesque dimension of the human experience.

Additionally, Mary's role in effecting a carnivalesque inversion between inevitable reality and mythical utopia is evident in “La abadesa preñada.” The inversion of the real with the ideal can be seen through the Virgin's miraculous reversal of the normal course of nature and in the restoration of a golden age. First, the miracles granted by Mary result in the reversion of the sinful reality of the abbess to her ‘ideal’ or ‘Marian’ state of virginity, a carnivalesque state according to Lachmann, who notes that “carnival appears as the return of the “Golden Age” [...] a classical

utopia motif of paradise lost and regained, of the Promised Land” (134). In the *Milagros*, the ideal sphere of the human experience is characterized especially by the concept of an Edenic, heavenly paradise; thus Gerli maintains that “queda claro que la Virgen representa los aspectos positivos presentes en el Edén desde la Creación- en Ella y su manifestación paradisiaca percibimos la luz espiritual y la posibilidad de la salvación y vida eterna” (43). An element of this ‘ideal reality’ of carnival is thus encountered in the regeneration of the abbess’ virginity and her miraculous, pain-free birth, a birth already noted as similar to that experienced by the Virgin Mary (Boreland, 23) and also strongly reminiscent of the Edenic state of mankind described in the book of Genesis. The divine restoration of the abbess likewise strengthens her identification with the Virgin Mary, the ideal Christian and “la plenitud de gracias [...] íntimamente relacionado con el concepto del pecado del hombre y la subsiguiente salvación” (Gerli, 46-47). In addition to restoring the abbess to her ‘ideal state’ of reality, the actions of Mary also result in the complete re-institution of the golden age presented at the beginning of the miracle, an ‘Edenic’ epoch of Christian virtue. According to Mary Jane Kelly,

‘La abadesa preñada’ begins with a three-stanza description of a now-lost golden age, in which people lived to a remarkably old age, miracles occurred regularly [...] and sinners repented and were forgiven their transgressions,” and at the end of the poem, “the abbess confesses her sin, repents, and experiences the Virgin’s miraculous intervention, all of which restores harmony in the convent. The happy ending can be read as a renewal of the values of the golden age. (Kelly 83)

In other words, the re-institution of an earthly utopia occurs due to the miracles of the Virgin Mary and is both extended and enhanced by none other than bastard son of the abbess, who despite his heritage as the consequence of an act of fornication which was especially carnivalesque, “issió muy bon omne, en todo mesurado/ [...] era el pueblo todo, d’elli mucho padago/ cuando murió el bispo, diéronli el bispado/ [...] /guñaba bien las almas [...] /sabié en todas cosas mesura bien catar” (Berceo, stanzas 578-579). Thus, the abbess’ son, whose miraculous birth and ideal upbringing directly result from Mary’s intervention, is instrumental in the return and spread of the Christian golden age. The carnivalesque dimension of Mary is evident in other miracle narratives as well, within which the Virgin contributes to the upheaval of authority. For example, in “El ladrón devoto,” Mary frustrates the efforts of the ‘justicia,’ representatives of the official ‘church-state’ culture (of whom Mary is the premier member), to execute a rightfully condemned thief: “La Madre gloriosa [...] /a esti condempnado, quisoli pro tener.../ metióli so los pies, do estaba colgado/ las sus manos preciosas, tóvolo alleviado/ non se sintió de cosa, ninguna embargado” (Berceo, stanzas 149-150). Similarly, in “El clérigo simple,” the Virgin chastises a bishop for prohibiting an uneducated clergyman from celebrating the Mass of the Virgin Mary, despite his obvious lack of understanding of the Christian Rites on a wider scale (Berceo, stanzas 220, 228-230). In sum, it is evident that the Virgin Mary and her interventions in “La abadesa preñada” and beyond manifest not only the religious dimension of the human experience, but the carnivalesque as well.

IV

The double characterization of Mary in “La abadesa preñada” plainly demonstrates the theme of the conflict between religion and carnival, a conflict which was fundamental to the medieval culture in which Berceo lived, and a conflict which one encounters at the center of the

Milagros de Nuestra Señora. Nonetheless, a polarized interpretation of the central figure of Berceo's most famous work is problematic to say the least, especially given the intellectual background of the author, as well as his presumed intentions in writing the *Milagros*. The literary and theological intelligence of Berceo and his spiritual and practical sensibilities have already been noted, as have his use of carnivalesque forms and images in order to connect with his audience. However, in his summary of the ecclesial background of Berceo, Gerli casts the author in a clearly anti-carnavalesque light, asserting that "si por una parte Berceo mina los recursos expresivos de la literatura juglaresca, por otra parte [...] exhibe un claro desprecio por los juglares y comparte la actitud censorial de la Iglesia ante ellos" (33). Additionally, Richard Burkhard, author of one of the more exhaustive analyses of Berceo's Marian theology, states:

We may speak accordingly of Berceo as a conservative in the matter of dogma who avoided any clearcut doctrinal assertions beyond the strictly traditional and sanctioned. His restraint is especially notable from a comparative standpoint. (232)

Thus, given the conservative literary and theological attitudes of Berceo, it follows that one would expect his works to reflect a certain level of the same restraint of expression, especially in reference to the Virgin Mary, of whom Berceo was clearly an ardent devotee. The paradoxical characterization of a Virgin Mary who participates in the popular culture instead of judging it, acts against the authority of the Church instead of reinforcing it, and identifies with the sinner instead of condemning her, presents at a minimum a literary and cultural incongruity within the *Milagros*. If, as Bakhtin sustains, there was in reality such opposition between the religious and carnivalesque spheres of medieval culture, then the Virgin Mary of the *Milagros* appears to be a literary contradiction, or at the very least as a figure inconsistent with the theological and cultural personality of Gonzalo de Berceo. Ryan D. Giles reflects a similar sentiment regarding the logical difficulty of maintaining the 'popular carnival' and the 'sacred official' cultures in total opposition, stating: "while Bakhtin was right to characterize medieval holidays as dual expressions of solemnity and laughter, his tendency to interpret the 'official' and the 'popular' side of feasts as conflictive and contradictory cannot be sustained" (*The Laughter of the Saints*, 5). Likewise, in a specific reference to Berceo, Sofia Carrizo Rueda declares that: "no creo que a nadie se le ocurra clasificar por esto a un autor y a una obra tan poco sospechosos de transgresiones a la ortodoxia, de «carnavalizantes» -aunque todo puede suceder" (30-31). Therefore, a perspective of the *Milagros* that embraces a strict dichotomy between the religious and carnival spheres of medieval culture may find itself to be an incomplete one.

However, a closer analysis of the principal elements of the *Milagros*, specifically the dualist experience of the sacred and the profane, indicates that the Virgin Mary, the key personification of both dimensions and their interaction, likewise reveals herself to be the unifier of the divine and human spheres and thus the representation of a possible reconciliation between religion and carnival. Therefore, one may propose that within at least certain sections of the *Milagros*, there exists an effort to synthesize and integrate the sacred and profane through the figure and works of Mary into an ordered reality within which exists the utopian and the mythical as well. In such an understanding of Berceo's work, one is able to speak of three unifying elements of the *Milagros*:

Un primer elemento unificador del poema es la presencia de un protagonista central [María]... Un segundo elemento es la materia o núcleo esencial de la obra, esto es, el

milagro, hecho teológico [...] Un tercer elemento de unidad puede considerarse la conciliación de contrastantes actitudes contemplativas, ya que el poeta capta y funda en una visión unitaria lo real y lo ideal, lo humano y lo divino. (Gariano 84)

In other words, one encounters in Mary and her miracles the realization or fulfillment of humanity's carnivalesque and divine inclinations and desires, and thus a return to an 'ideally real' state of the human experience, a state within which the total expression and fulfillment of human nature is possible. In fact, the presence of an effort to integrate and synthesize the divine and the human within medieval literature and culture has already been recognized by various intellectuals. García de la Concha declares that:

Mientras la mentalidad moderna contempla tierra y cielo como mundos diferenciados, el hombre medieval funde ambos en un proceso de «general divinización» que, como apunta Saugnieux, se convierte en una «humanización general»: ángeles y demonios, la Virgen y los santos.

Likewise, according to Gariano, “de todos modos, la presencia de dos planos no implica la mera yuxtaposición de dos esferas interdependientes, sino una progresión integral de lo físico a lo metafísico, que se conforma a la visión del mundo en tiempos de Berceo” (79). In other words, the religious sphere of the *Milagros* presents itself as the avenue through which the human being realizes and fulfills both its divine and earthly impulses. Such a unity of inclinations is both personified and actualized throughout the text by Mary, within whom one finds the reconciliation of humanity with its natural end, a reconciliation which permits humanity's return to a Edenic golden age which is its true state and thus a 'real utopia,' and one which is brought about through the graces bestowed by the mother of God (Gerli, 43). Thus, in the *Milagros*, the Virgin Mary, through her “impecable naturaleza [...] su plenitud de gracias, sus virtudes, y finalmente su confirmación en la gracia al final de su vida” (Gerli, 46), exemplifies the full actualization of the individual and therefore the total realization of his or her desires and needs, including the divine and the banal, the spiritual and the sexual. In such a cosmivision of the universal human experience, “todo ritual [carnavalesco] tiene un modelo divino, un arquetipo” (Eliade, 18), a relation whose medieval manifestation has noted by Northrop Frye, who states:

In the Middle Ages a quest of love, so closely approximating the regeneration of the soul in orthodox Christianity as to amount to a parody of it, was established as a central theme of literature [... however] we are never far from the sense that the ultimate quest is not so much the sexual union of a man and a woman as the union of all human beings with the nature that forms their environment. (248)

In the worldview summarized by Frye, human nature is not understood to be fundamentally in conflict, but essentially holistic, with a singular density, or 'telos,' shared by body and soul. Thus, the figure and actions of Mary in the *Milagros* represents the reconciliation and transcendence of the conflicting elements of the human experience; that is, in the mother of God Incarnated one finds divinized carnality.

In “La abadesa preñada,” the integration of the divine and human elements is revealed specifically in the essence and effects of the miracle, which is presented as the central action of

the text and which represents an inversion of the natural world by means of divine intervention. This inversion contains carnivalesque elements (for example, the eradication of the hard reality of sin), and likewise religious ones, especially regarding its connection with the fulfillment of the will of God. Given that “la Caída [del ser humano] representa sustancialmente la enajenación de la humanidad de la naturaleza [... y] la Redención supone la reconciliación del hombre con el esquema natural” (Gerli, 38), and keeping in mind the typological connection already noted between the abbess, Eve, and Mary, the poem’s double miracle can be understood to represent a return to an Edenic state, a state of being already recognized as the eventual goal of both the carnivalesque and religious spheres, and the state in which humanity existed before original sin and the subsequent effect of pain in childbearing (Genesis 3:16). In other words, the restoration of the ‘innocence’ of the abbess represents the restoration of a most real, yet most ideal, condition of human existence: a virginal, mythical, and Edenic condition which reflects the reconciliation of the human being with its own nature and with God, and one already most perfectly occupied by the Virgin Mary. According to Hamlin, “el milagro se construye como perfecto tipo invertido de la concepción y parto del Mesías, luego del cual es restituida simbólicamente la virginidad de la abadesa” (391); that is, the carnivalization of Mary and her identification with the abbess results likewise in the divinization of the abbess, especially as regards her relation to and identification with the Virgin. Therefore, the miracle, in its essence, can be defined as the divine institution of an ideal reality within the concrete world, and thus serves to synthesize the spiritual and carnal spheres of the human experience.

Given that the function of the miracle in the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* and “La abadesa preñada” is the reconciliation of fallen humanity with its celestial end, it follows therefore that the effects of the miracle should bring about a similar synthesis between the divine and carnivalesque dimensions and thus reflect the divinization of nature in general. In “La abadesa preñada,” such an integration is manifested in the re-institution of the golden age mentioned at the beginning of the miracle, a restoration which includes aspects of both popular celebration and religiosity. Indeed, the golden age described in “La abadesa preñada” contains both religious and carnivalesque elements; it is fully Christian in its values and practices, but its characterization as a golden, festive age of abundance and equality references the carnivalesque culture (Giles, “The Liberties of December and Gonzalo de Berceo’s Miracle of St. Ildefonsus,” 3). Additionally, it is important to note that the restoration of this golden age does not occur until after the humble confession of the abbess, who “díssolo su hacienda, por que era pasada/ por sos graves peccados, cómo fo engannada” (Berceo, stanza 564), and thus as a result “experiences the Virgin’s miraculous intervention, all of which restores harmony in the convent [...] the happy ending can be read as a renewal of the values of the golden age. Through her miraculous powers, the Virgin reestablishes Christian ideals” (Kelly, 83). Likewise, this re-institution is amplified through the actions and presence of the bastard son of abbess, who later becomes bishop, and of whom Berceo notes that “amávanlo los pueblos, e las sus clerezías/ amávanlo calonges, e todas las mongías/ todos por ond estaban, rogaban por sos días” (Berceo, stanza 580). According to Hamlin, the son also functions as a ‘type’ of Christ (391) and thus clarifies and strengthens the reality of a divinized ‘post-miracle’ world, a ‘religiously carnival’ resolution which lends credibility to the theory of Berceo’s literary and theological personality as one which would uphold a worldview which synthesized these two dimensions. In addition, the end of many of Berceo’s miracles with resolutions similar to that of “La abadesa preñada” contain elements of popular celebration, despite the fact that, according to Nekreashevich, one ought to expect to find festivities and celebrations only in relation the carnivalesque dimension (17), as such activities opposed the “official and serious tone of medieval

ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Bakhtin, 4). For example, at the end of “El milagro de Teófilo,” after hearing of the salvation of the protagonist through the divine intercession of Mary, “rendieron todos gracias, mugieres e varones /fizieron grandes laudes, e grandes processionnes / [...] diziendo oraciones /a la Madre gloriosa, buena todas sazones /El “Te Deüm laudamus,” fue altamente cantado” (Berceo, stanzas 891-92). Likewise, a similar resolution can be found in “El parto maravilloso,” in which the characters “hobieron del miracle, todos grant alegria/ rendieron a Dios gracias, e a Sancta Maria/ ficierson un buen cántico” (Berceo, stanza 452). These celebrations are obviously religious, yet they contain carnivalesque elements as well, given that carnival “draws on imagery and innuendo from folk songs, proverbs, extralitururgical rituals [e.g., processions], legends, and superstitions” (Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints*, 12). Additionally, the mere fact of the existence of a religious celebration situates the poem in opposition to the Bakhtinian characterization of the medieval religious sphere as stoic and rigid. Thus, “La abadesa preñada” reveals at the very least an attempt to partially reconcile and synthesize the divine and the human through the actions of the Virgin Mary, a synthesis which represents the fulfillment and actualization of the whole human nature, and an integration which reflects the literary and theological intelligence of Berceo.

In conclusion, Gonzalo de Berceo’s *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* reveals itself to be a sophisticated work of medieval literature which internalizes and manifests the prevalent cultural currents of its epoch. The subtle and orthodox theology, as well as the vibrant and popular elements which are presented in the poetic “cuentos” of this text, reveal the intelligence of Berceo and at the same time the complexity of medieval life and thought. Likewise, the characterization of the Virgin Mary with both divine-sacred and human-carnivalesque attributes manifests a key cultural and existential conflict of the Middle Ages. Finally, the effort of “La abadesa preñada” and other miracles to present a reconciliation of the sacred and banal spheres of humanity through the miraculous actions of the Virgin manifests the astute understanding of Berceo regarding Marian theology and the relation between the religious and carnivalesque inclinations of man. According to Juan Ruiz Domínguez: “podemos considerar a Berceo como innovador... enseña no una teología conceptualista sino existencial. Pero detrás de este aparente ropaje de sencillez, se ve muy clara la mete culta del teólogo” (26). It is this existential theology that can be seen inundating the *Milagros* through the personification of the Virgin Mary, a theology which draws together and attempts to answer the most fundamental questions and desires of human existence: the desire to express oneself with total liberty and at the same time unite oneself entirely with God.

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