

From the street to the brothel: following the go-between

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Abstract

One of the most recurrent female figures found in ancient and medieval literature was that of the go-between. Associated to the practice of gossip, bartering, display and selling of her trinkets around neighborhoods and streets, the old woman was allowed into the female domestic spaces of late medieval Europe. In the role of the visiting old acquaintance she could therefore act as an intermediary between young would-be lovers in clandestine relationships, thus becoming a fundamental asset in many fictional accounts, where her age and sterility underscore her evil deviant nature. Carrying out her own alternative freelance enterprise in the local sex market, her busy disposition turns her doings into an alternative evil counterpart to the ecclesiastical effort to lead women into the frames and strictures of either virginity or marriage. As a merchant and capitalist economy develops in late medieval Europe, a readjustment of the boundaries between public and private spheres is enacted and the wandering go-between finds her definitive location within the brothel. It is the trespass into such a space that allows her to lead the way to the figure later known as "the *madam*". My current concern is to analyze this figure and her dealings from the perspectives of gender and space, two paradigms deeply intertwined. Based on a consideration of prostitution as endowed with symbolic spatial connotations, this paper will analyze the evolution of the evil go-between figure from ancient and medieval literary types into its modern roles and profile.

1

In *The Production of Space* (1991: 8-9), Lefebvre describes the different levels according to which every society creates its own space, built out of physical, mental and productive mainstays. As a cultural social product, space is coded and can

thus be interpreted.¹ This paper will try to get an insight into the importance of space in the design of some symbolic domains existing in gender relationships in the Spanish late Middle Ages. In order to do so, the figure of the go-between will be presented as the signifier through which the diverse levels of gender meaning circulate².

Although this figure is also found in classical culture, the attributes of the Hispanic go-between derive as well from ancient Oriental sources, and are related to the arts of the Hebraic match-maker and ultimately to those of the Indian bawd. In Islamic societies, where female seclusion called for brief but intense encounters among women in the private domestic space, the go-between was one of the few channels through which they would contact the outer world. The Arabic conquest of Spain in the early 8th century allowed for the development of this figure in the country, where her literary trace can be followed till the 17th century. In fact, two of the literary Spanish masterpieces in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* (ca. 1340) and Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* (1499/1500), present this woman as a key character. In order to understand the resourcefulness of the go-between and her literary success, we should take into account the medieval perception of space related to the female body.

At first sight a composite neutral space, the body was in the early medieval times perceived as the battlefield where flesh and spirit contended for the Christian soul. Flesh and spirit represented "potential states that the body could actualize" (Salisbury 1991: 13); opposite abstract principles that could be understood by their expression in concrete bodily actions. Early theorists stressed either the body's spiritual or physical potencies, thus leading to the creation of a dual spatial system.

In the first model, in which the spiritual principle prevailed, the body was conceived as an inclusive place, one filled with content in and of itself, separate from the outside, autarkic, attractive and desired by others, thus vulnerable and requiring protection. Its main metaphor was virginity and its main spatial pattern the cell or the cloister, symbolizing the body itself as a closed unit. According to Peter Brown (1988: 299), virginity stood for the original state in which body and soul had been joined in paradise. It was a physical concretization, through the untouched body, of the pre-existing

purity of the soul. This model emphasized the spiritual projection of the body, its power to produce spiritual life.

However, virginity was not taken for granted; it was a continuous, dynamic and painstaking process (Salih 2001: 39). St Augustine argued that virginity was constituted not in the physical intactness of the body but in the intention to remain virgin. Therefore, it was inherently liminal because it was vulnerable, always endangered, even by thought. The Fathers associated the visibility of nuns with their participation in a lustful act that would disarm virginity, and therefore they strove to keep religious women away from the male gaze and in general, from society at large.³

Against this model which epitomized the union between the virgin soul and its creator, a second one underscored, instead, separation, talking of the individuation operated by the body as the location not of the spirit but of flesh.

Flesh conceived of as female is one of the most persistent topics of our interpretive tradition, and it could be translated into no other activity than prostitution. The prostitute personifies one of the most recurrent tenets of misogynistic thought: the belief in women being naturally endowed with a fleshly voracious appetite, out of their essentially carnal nature. In this sense, prostitutes take the place of, are substitutes for other women (Karras 2000: 249), not only literally, but also figuratively, by becoming the incarnation of that “universal female”. They are therefore conceived as common natural spaces; their bodies places men visit; open, communal ones.

Both cloistered nuns and prostitutes would remain outside the private sphere in the patriarchal economy; they do not participate in the economic exchange system of marriage, which keeps women and children as private items of family and estate property; they are, instead, women whose benefits are to be shared differently by the community.⁴ Salisbury (1991: 29) has pointed out that: “[...] by renouncing private physical fertility, virgins were seen as symbols that could bring fertility or prosperity to the community at large. Sexual activity, conversely, was imagined as a process of fragmentation and alienation from one’s own body, which is given to another.” Prostitutes’ bodies, marked by the extreme lack of any spiritual principle, were to be unproductive and sterile (Karras 1996: 82).

2

However, the fact that they were regarded as spiritually degraded didn't prevent Christianity from accepting their practice; rather some Fathers of the Church defended its existence not only as an example to beware of but as a useful counterpart to the institution of marriage seen as a sacred bond, the purity of which had to be defended from the fleshly human condition: the work of prostitutes in the public sphere would make it possible to maintain the relative chastity that marriage required from Christian wives. Similarly, the levels of internal violence to which the community would be subjected by some male youngsters could otherwise be reoriented towards the prostitutes.⁵ Finally, the tax policies arbitrated during these centuries would contribute to the well being of the community, and prostitution activated the economic life of any town by attracting luxury products and trade in general. Most of the historians agree on the fact that, despite some key attempts to eradicate it, medieval Christian societies adjusted its spaces so as to include prostitution as a visible meaningful reality.⁶

With the rise of urban life after the 12th century, these women would occupy the public space par excellence, the street,⁷ and would soon find ways to place themselves in rooms rented to neighbors, inn owners or other wealthier prostitutes. In an indiscriminate way, they would take to taverns, public baths, even churches and cemeteries. Facing the inevitable rise of private brothels then, local authorities tried to supervise the use of such areas as well as the regulation of brothels as a public enterprise. Monarchs, lay and ecclesiastical lords, would issue laws prohibiting independent prostitutes from working in other areas, while also presenting "protective legislation that guaranteed a prostitute's right to work and live in peace".⁸ Although the attempt to restrict their freedom of movement by ghettoing them in a municipal working district was successful in some countries and moments, in general authorities could or would not control completely these women, many of whom organized themselves in guilds, participated in public festivals on religious occasions, and would join in the running of official and private brothels and make important decisions at critical moments.

Many bishoprics, abbeys and monasteries included brothels among their properties and saw their enterprises financed by this important source of wealth and favours; by the 12th century the reformist zeal of some of the popes and

religious figures fostered the foundation of religious boarding houses that would host prostitutes and try to lead them into marriage or else into religious claustration. These attempts, though, would in the long run prove futile in the eradication of prostitution. Thus, ecclesiastical rulers would gladly join secular lords in their exploitation of brothels, not to mention that priests were a constant source of revenues in private whorehouses.

As widely acknowledged, many religious men proved unable to remain celibate, and plenty of records show their resorting to prostitutes or to stable marriage-like relationships with independent women. However there are also cases in which they woo and conquer those closest to them in the Christian imaginary landscape: nuns, whose virginity was as fragile as their invisible thoughts. No wonder then, that, to the popular mind, the distance between the virgin and the prostitute was not so huge and their places could be interchanged. After all, their functions had been designed for the common profit, or rather, in this case, for the male ecclesiastical profit. It only took a distorting mirror and a mocking stance to turn the nun into a whore and the whore into a nun. Language and parodic literature echoed this displacement: brothels were run by religious houses, whores addressed one another as sisters and referred to their female bawds and procurers as mothers,⁹ or talked of Christian charity as the virtue leading them and their priestly brothers there.

3

The go-between reveals itself as a connecting figure between these lay and ecclesiastical, male and female spheres. In Spanish literature we find her mainly in *LBA* as a "convent-trotter", that is, as an old woman who knew priests well and one who would be welcome in convents. Old age allowed her freedom from reproduction and sexual harassment, and so she was allowed to travel alone and to enter female private domains, such as convents and respectable family houses. Bringing news and little objects she would sell, she would also know some of the secrets of gynecology.¹⁰ But behind these, her real freelance enterprise was offering a bawd's services, and thus, along with her trinkets, she would bring women clandestine petitions of love from young clerks or priests. Experienced in the arts of seduction, the convent-trotter is

presented as the closest ally of the male lover, whom she charges for her services in convincing young maidens of the sincerity of the suitor's love.

In doing this, she would pose a threat to the institutional edifice based on the regulation of marriage and virginity and to society at large by urging women to come out of their seclusion and into the possibility of exclusion; in fact, many of those in the ranks of urban prostitution came from such an adventurous love fit through the contrivance of bawds. Whereas prostitutes were seen as necessary to maintain the proper social and ideological order, bawds were the agents who undermined such foundations and constituted, together with poverty, the easiest means of transference of women from one side of the social ladder to the other.

4

In *LBA* the go-between is presented from the point of view of the lusty priest, who cherishes her as a real mother and relishes in her multifarious experience of human nature. This 14th century work displays the traditional conception of the go-between as an undeniable popular type, one who celebrates the fleshly condition of mankind at large and embodies as well the prejudice of women as masters in deceit. In fact, their performative use of language is connected to healing capacities associated to the cure of love sickness, although in order to cure the male lover's disease, they have to prove themselves enemies to other women.

Almost two centuries later, at the beginning of the 16th century, the play *La Celestina* presents a darker profile of the bawd's lot. As a merchant and capitalist economy developed in late medieval Europe, the fate of prostitutes as an organized body of women would deteriorate. Devoid of their former rights, prostitutes would have to endure both the official pimping of governments through a relentless system of fines, as well as the intrusion of private economic interests and the attempts of eradication coming from parallel moral standards in the same governments who profited from their work. *Celestina* is still the old woman who avails herself of the anonymity the city provides; however, she has been caught and punished several times and paraded along the city streets, covered in feathers for her actions. Still, she keeps on procuring illicit love affairs. In the play, she has also turned her house into a small

private brothel where she hosts two young prostitutes. These, again, address her as mother and deeply care and feel for her; no wonder, since the bawd herself has been a prostitute in earlier days, which gives an air of familiarity to the business. In fact, the primary bonds of affection in the story are those among these women.

In *LBA* the bawd took the side of the male lover in his lust for adventuring into closed female spaces. Here, although she serves a young man in love, her concern for him is based mainly on his due payment. It is her insistence on keeping her money that will precipitate her own death in a fight over a stolen necklace with some servants. The go-between no longer identifies with the needs of her client, and thus loses any quality she might have had in earlier centuries; Celestina is realistic enough not to allow us to keep the illusion of gender or social harmony: she is a predator woman hunting women for men, just as much as she is the symbolic mother of those women who will no more find a place in modern society. Here women must beware other women and prostitution itself starts to be demonized and moved to the symbolic space of the criminal underworld. The ever-present traditional bawd, a strong resourceful intelligent woman, remains, but she is regarded as almost a witch, one who knows the devil and whose actions eventually cause the fall of the young lovers she worked for. The idea of respectability of old age turns now into that of spiritual sterility and of an evil nature; her rhetorical powers into a kind of malignant conjuring energy not to be allowed in women anymore. Her wits still grant her to acknowledge that it is men who plead her to seduce honest maidens, just as it is men who come to her for the prostitutes she trains and protects. Take her or leave her, she knows she has been called into existence and is needed in an economic, social and ideological structure curbing the movement of women in general.¹¹ Renaissance society would blame women for its own trespasses, the bawd receiving the whole weight of such structure. Standing for the principles of male culture but situated in the outskirts of female experience, she continues to be an ambiguous character.

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¹ Social space contains specific representations of double or triple interaction between the social relations of production and reproduction. Symbolic representation serves to maintain these social relations in a state of coexistence and cohesion. It displays them while displacing them, concealing them in symbolic fashion, with the help of nature. Representations of

the relation of reproduction are sexual symbols, symbols of male and female, accompanied or not by symbols of age, of youth and old age. This is a symbolism which conceals more than it reveals, since the relations of reproduction are divided into coded relations on the one hand, and covert, clandestine and repressed relations.

² The very name of this figure implies a dynamic conception of space that has also been defined by de Certeau (1988: 117) as: (...) space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. Some of those "conflictual programs" were enacted and symbolized by the go-between, a figure through which we can attest that in the Middle Ages "space carried meanings" (Hanawalt 2000: x).

³ This would lead to extremes such as those explained by Bloch (1991: 99): "Since the desire of a virgin is sufficient to make her no longer a virgin, and since, according to the patristic totalizing scheme of desire, there can be no difference between the state of desiring and of being desired, a virgin is a woman who has never been desired by a man". Schulenburg (1984: 51 *ff.*) has demonstrated that between 500 and 1100 the regulation of female claustration called for a gradual increase of rigorousness in the West; even in Anglo Saxon England, the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by early abbesses and other religious females were severely constrained.

⁴ In the case of nuns the benefits may be merely spiritual (they would derive from prayers and intercession of virgin women on behalf of the souls of sinners), although they might also exercise some of the rights of hospitality and care for the sick and needy. In the case of prostitutes, the benefits would be mainly for the married women, who would be released from the sins their husbands would require of them, as well as for the welfare of the patriarchal system itself, capable of assigning these attributes to those exceeding women in each community (Brundage 2000: 43).

⁵ María del Carmen García Herrero (1996.)

⁶ "At the same time, because of the depth of sin she embodied, the prostitute could represent in a very powerful manner the message of repentance, and thus be used as a metaphor for all

sinners, or as an example, so she was not to be denied. This has led authors like Schuster to doubt the suitability of the concept of “marginal group” for prostitutes. Mary Elizabeth Perry labels them not outsiders but “deviant insiders”: “Rather than barring them from the community, legalized prostitution provided a label for these women that functioned not to exclude them, but to integrate them into society under specific regulated conditions.” (Mazo Karras, Ruth: “Prostitution in Medieval Europe” in *The Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*).

⁷ In opposition to the cloister, these women would take the public space *par excellence*, the street, along with many other public spots. Streets themselves constitute the veins of the urban body, the set of axes through which the private houses look out into the public sphere and its main symbols. In urban settings, street stands for space itself, leading to other spaces, linking them in a wider net and providing, through the design into a perspective or into a winding and labyrinthine scheme, the sensation of a comprehensive and tight structure. Thus, streets stand as frontiers between the city itself and rural area or outskirts, and this frontier condition affects as well the street disposition itself: its being walled by houses which connect the public to the private sphere. In some villages there still can be found women and children occupying its sides as part of the domestic space; there they gather to chat and carry out some of their daily chores and occupations. But the taking of the streets was first and foremost a function of prostitutes. Strolling up and down the street, displaying their bodies, these public women would look for a location in the street and would call to be spotted there, one with the public space itself. It was the street that gave meaning to the whore and the whore that gave meaning to the street.

⁸ "According to E.J. Burford, the southern French town of Avignon was running a municipal red-light district as early as 1234; Montpellier was known to have designated a street as its municipal brothel quarter in 1285, and these municipal whores were declared to be under the king's protection.// In 15th c Paris records, the provost Ambroise de Lore allowed whores freedom of movement and protected them and their bawds. The wealthier and more successful of their number often bought houses in respectable areas outside the brothel quarter. Some of these larger private houses operated in time-honoured tradition as private, women-owned, women-operated brothels. Lower-

class whores meanwhile continued to use the city inns and taverns as meeting-places" (Nicky Roberts). According to Jacques Rossiard (1987: 130-131), public prostitutes would have to swear to the local authorities to respect their trade, would organize the communal monthly payment of the local militia night watch over their area as well as the common arrangement of food expenses and any other needs. They were also supposed to observe certain rules, like avoiding incestuous meetings, or accepting married men from the city as clients. María del Carmen García Herrero refers as well to the figures of the holders of the municipal brothel, who must guarantee weekly medical checking of the women, as well as the avoidance of weapons in the brothel, being also in charge of telling the opening and closing hours.

⁹ Although evidence of female exploitation of other women cannot be denied, there are also cases in which the female brothel owner defended their workers against the council restrictions.

¹⁰ For instance, we may find them practicing abortions or reconstructing hymens in the Arabic culture.

¹¹ The degradation of the figure coincides with that of prostitution and that of the significance of nuns. Although in the following centuries, some women make an art out of their seductive techniques and move aristocratic society to dream of luxurious private brothels, the figure of the respected and friendly bawd has faded by then. She, like most of whores, will find survival a difficult task.