MOTHERS, MORALS, AND POWER IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JUAN FRANCISCO MANZANO

In recent years, the mother figure's absence in Golden Age Spanish drama has been a strong catalyst for discussions of order in a patriarchal society. It is certainly striking that when the mother does appear, as in *La Celestina*, she fails to protect her daughter and the home. Even in an enlightenment period work of social criticism such as *El sí de las niñas*, the mother serves as a negative, traditional element through her attempts to match the girl with an aged beau. Between these two works lies the Golden Age of Spanish drama with its dearth of maternal characters. One might well ask where they went since they had to have gone somewhere. After all, the notion of motherhood has positive qualities everywhere, and if these attributes were too good to fit into oft violent drama, they had to serve other areas of discourse. Marianism offers one such possibility where the cult of the Virgin relies heavily on maternal imagery. The thought of the Virgin pleading with her son on the sinner's behalf presents a scene of maternal love and mercy. Despite its political and economic manipulation, it retains a benevolent core as an image. Other discourses, notably the closely interwoven ones of colonialism and slavery, also depend on Maternal imagery to cast a positive light. Yet an inspection of this rhetoric reveals an odd notion of motherhood. Instead of an interceding spiritual mother, we see one who claims complete authority over an adopted child. This tenuous double-talk, in which the devoted mother is at the same time omnipotent and abusive, flounders in the autobiography of Juan Francisco Manzano, a Cuban slave. Unlike in the genre mentioned above, mother figures abound in this early nineteenth-century autobiography. And it is through this abundance of mothers that Manzano demonstrates the perversion of the maternal image in the dicourse of slavery.

Much discussion has arisen of late concerning the strange relationships that can develop between abusers and victims. Kidnapping victims may become emotionally dependent upon their kidnappers as may prostitute upon pimps. Similarly, in Manzano's situation, an odd confusion of emotional ties binds him to his owners despite their open exploitation of him. As Ivan A. Schulman notes (p. 24,) the author was probably born in the latter years of the eighteenth century on the estate of Matanzas. There, in the household of the Marchioness Justiz, he became her favorite when still a baby. Upon the death of this woman, her title as well as her ownership of Manzano passed on to the Marchioness Joaquina who continued to treat him as a child. Yet strikingly, as he matured, the nature of this treatment changed even while the terminology did not.

The oft used image of the master as parent and the slave as child, mirroring the relationship of God and man, takes on emotional significance in Manzano's situation. Notably, the relationship of master/parent and slave/child adopts the moral overtones of its model. The slave is always expected to falter and must receive punishment for his own good. Thus even while this morality turns into an instrument for oppression, the reader cannot help observe how both marchionesses appear to sincerely believe in their moral right as mother figures. In order to find his own voice, Manzano must not only cast off the legal bond between his owner and himself, he must cut himself off from someone who claims to be his mother and permanent moral superior. To achieve his intellectual freedom, he has to subvert the moral structuring built up around the definitions of master/parent and slave/child.

Naturally, Manzano does accept and follow to some degree certain assumptions of inferiority that his owners have impressed upon him. He appears trapped in a sort of eternal childhood in which everyone of consequence is an elder and superior despite actual ages. Even though he is María del Pilar Manzano and Toribio de Castro's first child, he does not give the impression of having younger siblings who look up to him as the eldest. His description of situations involving his siblings only serve to show their horror at his suffering and to emphasize his inability to alter their fates. For example, after their mother's death, he fails to obtain for his freed sister her share of the inheritance that the marchioness has promised to hold for them (p. 63)[1]. His complete failure in the task underlines his inability to help his younger siblings. Since he cannot be responsible for them, he cannot guide them and cannot practice the role of father or authority figure. In a sense, he demonstrates his incapacity as an author of actions and his unchanging role as a malleable character whom his owner shapes. A natural association thus develops between his interminable childhood -- he may never grow up completely -- and his lack of power vis-à-vis the elders who own him. His description of his physical state also adds to this picture of himself as a child among adult owners when he notes his small stature, writing "*...yo he atribuido mis pequeñez de estatura y la debilidad de mi naturaleza a la amargosa vida qe. desde trese a catorse años he traido siempre flaco debil y estenuado...*" (p. 39).[2]

The need to establish the marchionesses as multiple mothers figures to Manzano's eternal child requires some displacement of his father. For in order to expand the role of the marchionesses who, through the tradition of slavery, have the right to form the child in every way once it is born, the father's role must undergo simplification. Toribio de Castro gives neither surname nor intellectual formation to his son though

1. All quotes are from: Juan Francisco Manzano. Autobiografía, cartas y versos de Juan Francisco Manzano. *Autobiografía, cartas y versos de Juan Fco. Manzano con un estudio preliminàr por José L. Franco*, Havana: Municipio de la Habana, 1937.
2. The quotes from Manzano's text includes original misspellings and grammatical idiosyncrasies.

he does try to give him a sense of morality. Manzano describes his father during a stay with his family after a period of upheaval with the Marchioness Joaquina. He writes that *"...el cararte seco y las horades de mi padre como estaba siempre a la vista me asian pasar una vida algo mas llevadera..."* (p. 39). When his father disapproves of a drawing that Manzano has done of a witch, he writes, *"...mi padre con la austeridad de su cararter me proibió no tomase inter el viviese los pinseles..."* (p. 42). The two marchionesses do, however, compete with his natural parents. In this manner, he writes that people remind him of how *"...mas estaba en sus brasos qe. en los de mi madre..."* and that the old woman called him *"el niño de su bejez"* (p. 34). Moreover, the relationship with the first marchioness supersedes the one between the young Manzano and his father. Thus when his father punishes him at one point, the marchioness becomes so angry that she refuses to see the man. Only her confessor can dissuade her. Manzano then writes that she only spoke to him again after establishing *"...los derechos de mi padre qe. a mi le correspondian como a tal y lo que a ella como a... los de ama, ocupando el lugar de madre..."* (p. 35). In a sense, this is a verbal act of castration that deprives the man of any role in the moral upbringing of his son. She effectively posits herself as mother figure and owner above the father, reducing his role in order to make the child socially into a product of the mother/owner's will alone.

So from an early age, Manzano enters upon a confusion of owner and maternal figure, and he realizes that her wishes bear more weight than the opinion of a father who hopes to form him morally. The Marchioness Justiz, however, is not the only one who believes in this image of the owner as parent with rights above and beyond the rights of the natural parent. The slave himself falls back on this familial terminology to describe how Don Nicolás, raised by Manzano's natural mother, María del Pilar, and thus about the age of the narrator, *"...me queria no como a un esclavo sino como a hijo apesar de su corta edad."* (p. 56) Thus even when trying to show how a master was kind to him, he ends by using a simile that reinforces the owner's appearance of superiority. Both Manzano and Don Nicolás subscribe to the notion that the emotional link between a master and a slave follows the model of a parent and a child. This way of looking at their relationship necessarily shapes that relationship. The situation makes sense when one realizes that in order to work as a social definition, the parental role of slavery as supposedly benevolent must gain some acceptance among both parties. One should note, however, that Manzano does not quite go as far as Don Nicolás in his acceptance of this idea. After all, he does not say that he loved the man as a father. So as we shall discuss later, in spite of the unconscious depths these parental definitions have reached in him, he can and does portray their actual lack of benevolence.

After establishing these social definitions found in slavery, one may observe how character judgments found therein help to form a sense of morality. For if these definitions remain fixed, so do the identifications that the slave tradition has foisted upon the individuals. And if the master/parent must teach the slave/child various

rules so that the latter may act responsibly in his milieu, what happens when the child can never grow up? In this way, the Marchioness Joaquina's punishments and moral lessons do not follow any sort of development since Manzano could not possibly improve according to his set identification as a moral inferior. The eye she keeps on her slaves becomes a morally vigilant one that seeks to force them to follow rules of behavior that she believes they would never find on their own. When she hears that some of her slaves are gambling, she has Manzano searched. Caught unfortunately at the wrong moment, the narrator has money that he has earned while working for a painter. The marchioness proceeds to take the money away and punish him even though he tells her how he got it since, as she explains, he should have told her about it before (p. 62). No one asks a slave for explanations. Everyone presupposes the inferiority of his intentions.

Interestingly enough, most of the Marchioness Joaquina's punishments have to do with an apparent obsession with what belongs to her and her control of it. During days of torturing Manzano for absent-mindedly shredding some leaves in her garden, she does not offer him any complex morals. The writer remembers that *"...me preguntó si queria otra vez tomar unas ojas de su geranio como no quise responder pr. poco me susede otro tanto y tuve abien desir qe. no..."* (p. 52). She only emphasizes how the geranium plant belongs to her, and that the slave may not touch it. Likewise, other episodes consist of accusations of stealing money or food from his owner. For instance, when Manzano exchanges a peseta he has for a shinier one that he is to offer at the church, everyone believes that he has the second one. Notably, he runs to the marquess whom he has previously nursed back to health, but the man exclaims, *"...gran perrazo y pr. qe. le fuistes a robar la peseta a tu ama."* (p. 46). One would think that the peseta, intended as an offering, should belong to the Church, a saint, or even God but not to the marchioness. After all, an accusation of stealing from the divine would constitute a heinous crime. One could take this situation further and argue that in seeking to please the divine, Manzano was seeking to place himself on the side of a higher power. Undoubtedly, he suceeds in portraying the pettiness of his owners since the most heinous crime that Manzano can commit is stealing from them. In fact, it is striking how accusations of stealing abound. The reader can see how the accusations reaffirm the institution of slavery by underlining the moral weakness of the slave. Within this system, one never pays attention to what has actually happened as much as one does to what the marchioness thinks has taken place. The social definitions of master and slave provided blinkers so that everyone ignores the unimaginable -- the moral and thus self-monitoring slave.

The inconsistency of the Marchioness Joaquina's unpredictable nature, in contrast to the supposed benevolence of her chosen role, begins to reveal the weaknesses inherent in the definitions that slavery offers. Although Manzano openly uses familial terms to describe his relationship with his owner, the image of the owner as mother cannot remain intact. This comparison gradually falls apart, and with it, the slave owner's claims to a moral superiority. As already mentioned, after the death

of her mother, Justiz, the Marchioness Joaquina follows in the footsteps of the old woman as mother/owner to the young Manzano. Too young to serve his new mistress as a page, he takes the place of a beloved pet for the woman. He describes how she would make him sit at her feet to eat as the Marchioness Justiz had done earlier and *"...me bestia peinaba y cuidaba de qe. no me rosase con los otros negritos..."* (p. 37). For this reason, after she has begun to punish him terribly, he can still return her love when she treats him well again. He sees her as a mother and thus writes:

> *...cuando mi ama dulsificó conmigo su genio yo dejé insensiblemente sierta dureza de corazon qe. abia adquirido desde la ultima vez qe. me condenó a la cadena y el trabajo perserverando en no ponerme ni mandarme poner la mano abia olvidad todo lo pasado y la amaba como a madre...*(p. 66).

Nonetheless, even when using the social definitions of master/parent and slave/child, Manzano shows the use of the mother figure to command respect and freeze social relations. The psychologically enslaving purpose of the parent and child metaphor stands revealed when the marchioness takes him back from Don Nicolás, saying *"...si yo no conosia mi bien y qe. si ella me llebaba era pr. qe. lo debia de aser pues no debia de estar sino a su lado hasta qe. determinara de mi..."* (p. 59). Later on in the same episode, he writes that she *"...me preguntó si me acordaba de mama mia* [Marchoness Justiz] *y le dije qe. si, pues yo he quedado en su lugar ¿me olles? me dijo..."* (p. 59). In other words, he must always remain dependent upon her better sense of judgment since, forever childlike, he cannot possess the necessary discernment for independent action. Moreover, the supply of dominating mother figures can never run out. A new one simply inherits the position of the old along with all the other possessions. So the supposed comparison of slavery with parenting only works if one supposes that a child remains stuck at age six or seven without further development.

Despite its overlaying of benevolence, this mother and child relationship between the Marchioness Joaquina and Manzano does not at all resemble María del Pilar's interaction with her son. And so it is through the juxtaposition of the unpredictable marchioness and María del Pilar that the reader can best see how slavery's use of the benevolent parental image falls apart. Whenever the marchioness has Manzano punished, his real mother desperately tries to help him, mourns his pain and at times even throws herself physically in the way to protect him. Manzano describes how on one occasion:

> *...la culpa de mi madre fue qe. biendo qe. me tiraba a matar se le tiró en sima y asiendose atender pudé ponderme en pie cuando llegando los guardieros del tendal nos condujeron puesta mi madre en el lugar del sacrisifisio pr. primera vez en su vida pues aunqe. estaba en la asienda estaba esenta del trabajo como muger de una esclava qe. se supo condusir y aserse considerar de todos...*(p. 44).

Notably, at this moment, he adds that his mother has never undergone this kind of punishment before as everyone respects her for her husband's conduct. She usually finds herself high up within the slaves' section of the social hierarchy. In this manner, the injustice of punishing her so harshly for her self-less act serves to show the unnaturalness of the situation. Furthermore, it undermines the position of the marchioness who calls herself "mother" but simply does not follow María del Pilar's model motherhood.

In addition to María del Pilar's protective instincts, another interesting aspect of motherhood becomes apparent in her attempts to buy her son's freedom. After his punishment for tearing the genarium leaves, his mother comes to him and says, *"...aqui llebo el dinero de tu libertad, ya tu vez qe. tu padre se ha muerto y tu vas a ser ahora el padre de tus hermanos ya no te bolberan a castigar mas..."* (p. 53). One observes here how María del Pilar not only wishes to defend her son from future suffering, she also recognizes the inevitable obsolescence of her part in her son's life. For as her son matures and assumes responsibilities -- here the role of his siblings -- she expects to lose her position of dominance. In other words, she plans for him to take the parent's position himself even before her own death. Unlike the marchionesses, she does not represent a continuous line of owners as mothers. In this way, the reader notes how the marchionesses have had to denaturalize the definition of motherhood in order to call themselves Manzano's mother. Speaking in terms of social definition, the narration of events leaves the marchioness Joaquina redefined not as both mother and owner but merely as owner.

Along with the questioning of the marchioness' claims to the role of mother, one begins to doubt her claim of morality. The episode in which his mother tries to buy his freedom ends with the statement *"...mas el resultado de eso fue qe. mi madre salió sin dinero y yo quedé a esperar qe. se yo qe. tiempo qe. no he visto llegar."* (p. 53). Manzano chooses not to elaborate, and so the reader wonders whether or not the Marchioness Joaquina simply took the money away from his mother as her right as owner. The narrator does hint that he has been waiting for his eventual freedom, and so it is also possible that the marchioness did promise his mother that she would later free him but then broke that promise. The latter seems completely plausible given the situation further on with the inheritance that María del Pilar left in the care of the marchioness. In the case of the inheritance, others knew that the marchioness had made a promise to his mother. It is intriguing to observe how when Manzano first asks her if she has yet revised his mothers's papers, he describes that she *"...contestome **en tono agradable** qe. todabia [no]..."* (p. 62, boldface mine). When he asks her again, however, trying to obtain his sister's share for her, he expresses at how *"...incomoda me respondió mi señora qe. si estaba muy apurada pr. la erensia qe. si yo no sabia qe. ella era eredera forsosa de sus esclavos encuanto me buelbas a ablar de la erensia te pongo donde no beas el sol ni la luna..."* (p. 63, boldface mine). In using her position as owner to claim his inheritance, she tries to sidestep a scrutinizing of her morality. Whether or not she inherits from her slaves within a

system in which slaves can own nothing does not hide the fact that she lied to and even misled María del Pilar. In addition, she does not appear comfortably settled in her stance as it takes her some time and some irritation with Manzano to help her decide to keep the money. The observation of her discomfort reveals the instability of the moral superstructure that she forces down upon the situation. She has just made up a rule that fits in with her notions of property but with little else. Perhaps Manzano does not openly call her a thief and liar due to his protector's urging, but in any case, he does not have to do so. The description of events as he offers them are enough to demonstrate the marchioness' immoral behavior in contradiction with the self-definitions that she has put forth.

Naturally, one does not see a gradual development of Manzano's sense of independence or an inversion of his owner's self-definitions and moral structure in stages. Like the arbitrary behavior of the Marchioness Joaquina, all of the evidence as to her questionable values and the hints of Manzano's separate sense of identity do not grow into a crescendo. They occur irregularly throughout the work, and thus the reader realizes that even though the writer has adapted to such options as the problematic parent/owner one, he nonetheless has a sense of self-worth and separateness from his owners. For instance, when he hears a man say rather ironically "*mire v. qe. este va a ser mas malo qe. Rusó y Vortel...,*" (p. 50), he writes that upon finding out "*...qe. eran unos enemigos de Dios me tranquilise pr. qe. desde mi infansia mis directores me enseñaron a amar y temer a Dios...*" (p. 50). He trusts in the religiosity of those who have raised him, and beyond this simple acceptance, he trusts in his own faith and morality. The moral structure built up around the presumed goodness of the master and the likewise presumed badness of the slaves has not affected either his view of himself or, as we shall see, of the marchioness.

In fact, Manzano ultimately remains quite apart from the Marchioness Joaquina's attempts to correct him. The marchioness might accuse him of all sort of wrongdoings and have him punished terribly, but she fails to introduce a sense of guilt in him. It is possible that she does not bother to do so, thinking that he cannot act responsibly. No matter what her reasons, her failure to involve him at a level such as guilt means that he remains purely a victim of circumstance. In other words, he never deserves her anger, and he knows it. In this way, when he tells of how he explained to his father and another servant about a lost peseta that he was accused of stealing, he notes: "...pero mi ama nunca crelló sino qe. era algun ardid de qe. me valia; pero yo creo qe. el tratamiento qe. alli tenia fue disposision sulla..." (p. 49). It is intriguing here how Manzano uses the verb *creer*, to believe, in both clauses to show the difference between his and the marchioness' ability to discern. After explaining the truth about the coin, he says that she believes, wrongly, that he would steal and lie about it. At the same time, he believes, correctly, that any treatment he receives depends upon her mood. In other words, he not only thinks independently of his owner, he observes the irrationality of events and believes himself able to understand things better than she can. He can demonstrate a logical superiority.

Manzano's continued creativity with words first orally and later on paper, despite repeated efforts to stop him, best reveals the extent of his intellectual independence from his masters. As a child, the Marchioness Joaquina has other slaves punish him whenever he recites verses he has invented, and she even spies upon him herself (p. 41). Her need to watch over his creative speech and have him constantly punished belies the fact the she cannot control him. Even when still quite young, he does not readily give in to the simplistic notion that he may not converse with others because his words derive from his creative abilities. His artistic drive leads him to talk whether or not he has an audience. As he puts it,

> *...era tal el flujo de ablar qe. tenia qe. pr. ablar ablaba con la mesa con el cuadro con la pared & yo a nadien desia lo qe. traia comigo y solo cuando me podia juntar con los niños les desia muchos versos y le cantaba cuentos de encantamientos qe. yo componia de memorias...*(p 41).

Some years later, during a stay with Don Nicolás and his wife in Havanna, Manzano begins to teach himself to write, using his master's handwriting as his model. This young man who, as we have already noted, loves Manzano as a son, catches him writing various times and orders him to stop *"...aquel entretenimiento como nada correspondiente a mi clase..."* (p. 57). The narrator does not say whether or not Don Nicolás threatened him with any physical harm, and given the description of his kind nature, he probably did not. Yet even though Manzano respects him, he refuses to stop writing. Although a slave, he nevertheless controls his own intellect. Sylvia Molloy notes that he "...does not identify with the master himself: he identifies with reading, with his writing, with the *means* through which he, Manzano, will ultimately achieve his own identity." (p. 414).

In examining the autobiography, the reader notes the hesitance of Manzano's memories and how he corrects his doubtful chronology. He seems unable to control his own sense of past and even his sense of self as he frequently writes *"qe. se yo pr. qe."* when speaking not only of what has happened to him but also of his own actions. The use of this phrase does indicate some defensiveness akin to temporary insanity, particularly when he tells of something he did to anger his owners. At the same time, however, he uses this phrase when speaking of others when they torture him. Ultimately, this inability to understand why the others do certain things as well as his failure to present events in historical order function positively to convince the reader. For as Sylvia Molloy notes, the actual seesaw progression of events in the original manuscript is much more overwhelming than the steady increase in torture portrayed in the much revised 1840 translation into English. (p. 407). The overall effect is frightening and gives a strong sense of psychological honesty. It is in the account of his lonely suffering that Manzano's voice finds strength. Yes, he adopts some of the metaphors that slavery uses to defend itself, but his description of his relationship with his owners subverts their definitions of master and slave as parent and child. His autobiography redefines himself as well as them. Their unpredictable cruelty is

incomprehensible while he is merely helpless to placate them. Thus the supposedly maternal relationship between mistress and slave finally appears quite unlike what its language initially implies.

As a mulatto and slave of special status within his owner's household, Manzano defies easy classifications. In addition, his unusual ability to write, tied so closely to his experiences and identity, keeps the reader from extending this autobiography to the individual lives of other nineteenth-century Cuban slaves. He hardly appears to have a milieu, a community of peers. Yet it was this remarkable differentiation that led at last to his freedom and the publication of the autobiography by British abolitionists. Even while he was cut off from those who also suffered under slavery, it is telling that his voice remains undeniably human and readily understandable to the present-day reader. As a commentary on the nature of slavery and the control of another's body, his work continues to demonstrate the institution's essential irrationality. In Manzano's case, we have the unusual opportunity to hear the maternal image of slavery in the mouth of a woman who had a certain affection for him. And thus it is through the extremeness of her behavior that the contradictions within this discourse find a sharp portrayal. Manzano takes the mother/child metaphor away from the slave owner, emptying it of its apparent benevolence and revealing it as child abuse.

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