Visions of La Ciega:
Inquiries into Sanctity, Blindness, Candlesticks, and Confession
in the Life and Trial of María Cotanilla

by

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Fig. 1 Attributed to Jusepe de Ribera, Medigo ciego y un muchacho. 17th century. Pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash, over black chalk, 19 x 14.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org (accessed Jan 4, 2016).


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Introduction

This is most likely not how she would have wanted us to meet her, but this is how we meet María Cotanilla: filed away in the Inquisition Archives at the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid. In her trial, a case of feigned sanctity, we come to know her as “the accused,” but everyone in her small town of Colmenar de Oreja—even those who suspected she could see—called her “La Ciega,” the blind woman. María started to go blind at five years old. She was an orphan by age seven and a beggar girl soon after that, going door to door to ask the villagers for alms. They invited her into their homes for dinner, gave her work as a laundress, and saw her every day at church. It was until she was in her twenties that María gained renown in Colmenar as a mystic. She told her neighbors of her most beautiful visions, of hiding in the Virgin’s glowing skirts, of a boy in tree holding a bird. She told them of ecstatic journeys—once she was carried by angels to the sea shore and once during a particularly dull sermon, angels had brought her to a more riveting sermon in a faraway church. Her reputation as a mystic peaked when began recounting ecstatic voyages to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory. Villagers of Colmenar began to seek María out as a messenger between this world and the next, as a
communicator with the souls of deceased loved ones. María became an exacter of divine redemption, helping her neighbors sort out the unfinished business that kept their loved ones from entering heaven.

It is unclear who first called María “fraud” and “liar” or when exactly she ceased to be known as “mystic” and was forever deemed “false mystic.” It could be that suspicions arose when María’s mystical work came to revolve around the trafficking of money to pay off the debts of the deceased. Maybe they sprung from her heretical claim that she could ferry souls out of eternal damnation. Perhaps it was her public displays of demonic possession, her graphic and disturbing accounts of the devil’s temptations to her chastity or the incident when her landlady found her with a candlestick lodged in her vagina. At some point, on one of the inquisitor’s visits to Colmenar de Oreja, some villager or villagers\(^1\) denounced María to the inquisitor as “Illuminist.” From that day on, she was written down in the records as “the accused” on August 18\(^{st}\), 1675, after the Inquisition had collected enough incriminating testimony from her neighbors, María Cotanilla was arrested.

For the next few years, María lived in the secret prisons of the Inquisition as her neighbors and friends were called to testify against her before the court. On December 4\(^{th}\), 1675, María confessed to the Tribunal that she had invented the entire mystical persona and all of the visions and ecstasies. On that day, María introduced herself in a new way, as a brilliant inventor and a grand storyteller. We cannot know if she confessed in earnest; the Inquisition often coerced confessions through incentives or torture.\(^2\) So,

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we cannot know how María Cotanilla would have introduced herself to us off the record. And we cannot know how she would want to be remembered today.

I found María’s story in the tea-brown folios of Legajo 114,\(^3\) transcribed in the delicate cursive of a few different inquisitorial notaries. The manuscript was warped, its binding partially disintegrated, its ink faded—wear and tear to be expected in a lifetime of three and a half centuries. The document felt important and fragile, a singular piece of the historical record. I knew that there was hardly any literature about María Cotanilla or her case,\(^4\) but as I leafed through, it seemed that entire sections of the document had been untouched. Pages stuck together, seemingly undisturbed by prying fingers—*for how long?* As I coaxed them apart, I could not help but wonder if the musty air rising off them was seventeenth-century air, trapped between the folios all these years. I could not tell if the document’s latency made it feel more or less sacrosanct in its historicity.

As I learned to decipher the archaic orthography and came to know the notaries’ script, the text began to feel less like a formally documented legal proceeding and more like the record of a life. Although the Inquisition had no intention of biographizing María Cotanilla, it was attempting to piece together an understanding of her and her culpability as the accused. In gathering evidence and witnesses for the case against her, the Inquisition had summoned to appear in court all the corners of María Cotanilla’s world—her friends, enemies, and her past. And so, as I read, I used these same bits of information to piece together my own understanding of her life. I was surprised by how much I could glean from these formal judicial transcriptions. As her neighbors came in

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\(^3\) Legajo is Spanish for “file.”

\(^4\) I have only found her mentioned in Stephen Haliczer, *Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
one by one to testify, I saw each of them work to reconstruct María and her claims to sanctity before the Inquisition. I observed what the villagers, on the whole, tended to deem noteworthy—what traits, behaviors, and actions of María’s bore mentioning, what events of her life reverberated throughout the town, what they thought of her, and how they related to her. I saw them trace out how they had engaged with María’s mystical persona and where there doubts arose.

In these moments, when the witnesses cast themselves in relation to María’s mysticism, I found the theatricality of a courtroom drama seeped through the formality of the Inquisition’s judicial proceedings. When the Inquisition summoned the villagers to testify in the case, it was probably, for many of them, their first time in the spotlight. They were called to perform before the inquisitor and the notary, who documented their performance for inquisitors and council members of even higher ranks. As the witnesses took the stand, I watched them each jump through hoops to please their audience. They were each in a precarious position. The Inquisition had summoned them because of their proximity to the accused. To please the Tribunal, a witness would have to, on the one hand, divulge as much information as they could. However, they also had to be careful not to reveal anything that might incriminate them. The witnesses, thus, had to walk a delicate tight-rope of knowing and not knowing. I observed the villagers make themselves up, take the spotlight, face their audience, and perform a character. Some witnesses assert that they were suspicious of María from the start and others admit that they had believed, up to a point, in her mystical act. Some pretend to be shrewd and inquisitive, others assume a character of naiveté. In their most over-acted moments, I began to doubt if I could trust any witnesses or their testimonies as truthful. It became clear that, as I read these transcriptions, I would always need to bear in mind that
everyone was telling *their side* of a story and that they were doing a lot of footwork to appear innocent. It would, thus, be difficult to arrive at any version of the story that was not stilted, filtered through a court chamber. Not only did I find discrepancies in their accounts of how events unfolded, but I also began to notice that certain villagers had a harder time denouncing María, that they shared meaningful relationships with her. It was this observation that crystallized something I had vaguely known from the start: Each of these witnesses was a full person who lived an entire life, replete with complex relationships, difficult choices, changing bodies, long days, and long nights.

The inquisitor’s lines of questioning, the invitation of doubt, and the emotional stakes of the courtroom that gave me a window into fullness of these lives. However, it was not the inquisitor’s prerogative to explore that potential. I found myself angry at the inquisitor, not, as I would have expected, because he was a ruthless interrogator for a tyrannical institution, but because he had left so much unasked. While it was not his official post to chronicle history, in the absence of other records, the inquisitor was effectively acting as documentarian. So, every portal that he did not open for exploration, he essentially sealed shut for us today.

My frustration came to a head when, in my reading, I arrived at folio 162, the first hearing of the accused. Until that point, I had only met María as she was invoked as the accused. This was the first time that I was finally in the same room as she was. It is a rare treasure to have, on record, a person from that time tell her story in her words, particularly a poor blind woman. What’s more, María was clearly a magnificent storyteller. If, as she claimed, María invented all of these visions and ecstasies, then was an amazing fabulator. If her confession was false and she actually experienced these mystical encounters as embodied events, that does not detract from her gift. For, in her
retellings of these experiences, she drew in her listeners such that they came to believe her, at least to some extent. And, it is clear from the testimonies that these stories spread through town, setting curiosity aflame and remaining alight in peoples’ memories for years. Ultimately, it was María’s success as a storyteller, the effusion of her stories, that brought María’s case to the Inquisition’s attention. And yet, in her testimony, María, like her neighbors, breezes over each of these stories, offering one- or two-sentence recapitulations and nothing more.

I came to love the trial transcription, first as a piece of historical drama and then as a process that stirs and reveals the inner-worlds of humans. I had grown attached to its musty scent, its slouching spine, its weight in my arms as I retrieved it from the archivist in the morning and returned it to her in the afternoon. It had come to feature prominently every time I pictured a courtroom scene and I bid it a silent, tender goodbye before I flew home. And yet, I felt even more acutely, its insufficiency as the only record of this history.

If I was to explore the story of María Cotanilla, I would have to pry open the portals that the Inquisition had sealed for us. I could not ignore that people have always had questions, ideas, desires, doubts, visions for themselves and their world; that people have always sought to make sense of the world through their thoughts and feelings. To ignore this would be to deny people their personhood and condemn them to a two-dimensional existence in the historical record. For, it is in the interflow of thoughts and feelings that I have been able to recognize people of the past as people.

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5 Most witnesses recount vividly stories María told them several years prior.
While, over the course of the trial, I had gotten to know some of the villagers of Colmenar, I had only seen glimmers of their thought processes and feelings. I knew that they were there, but did not know precisely what these interior narratives were. How could I go about expanding what the Inquisition collapsed to fit María Cotanilla and her neighbors into its judicial apparatus? How could I air out their history, let it circulate in and out of their bodies as it once did? How could I acknowledge the constant, mutual permeations between these people, their deepest interiors, and the world around them? To insist upon the historicity and indispensability of these narratives to the historical project, was to land myself in a catch-twenty-two: As these interior narratives were excluded from the historical record, if I was to include them in my project, I would be unable to verify, much less prove, their historicity with any archival evidence. However, to let this archival absence deter me from including these narratives would be to reify the absoluteness of this absence. Thus, I would need a different historical logic to guide my work.

This was a very nerve-racking prospect for three reasons. First, I was afraid to over-determine or over-write this history. Second, I wanted to work against the flattening of these persons into the Inquisition’s judicial process, but I did not want to bungle their three-dimensionality. For, it would another act of historical violence to fix them anew in ill-conceived contortions. Third, I was determined to remain alert to how the pressures of the Inquisitorial process might have pushed witnesses to tweak the history they were telling. What they said, however, was all I had to work with in this beautiful and slightly warped document.
This love-hate relationship to archive is, it seems, the historian’s plight and richest endeavor. In my research, I found avid debate around the archive, creative interpretations, and proposed coping mechanisms.

In “Venus in Two Acts,” for example, Saidiya Hartman at once tells us the story of ‘Venus,’ a young girl captured and murdered on a slave ship and candidly narrates her own struggles with and against the archive in the process. In the scarcity of firsthand accounts of enslavement by Africans, Hartman writes that she must work from transcripts of the trials of Venus’s murderers—an archive “inseparable from the play of power that murdered Venus and her shipmate and exonerated the captain.” Hartman asserts that archives not only “produce” historical events, but that they continue to enact violence against the persons they document. For, when a subaltern person is recorded in the archive, it is usually when their lives have collided with authorities, in an “act of chance or disaster...an aberration from the expected and usual course of invisibility.” They are, thus, captured and held in those documents in a perpetual state of extremity, duress, violence. Hartman calls our attention to the holes the archive, to what has fallen through them, and to the gravity of that loss. We can only meet someone like Venus (or like María), Hartman writes, when “we stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no

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8 Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 10. Full quote: “The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery...”
9 Hartman “Venus in Two Acts,” 2. She cites Foucault here
glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might
demand.”10 Hartman shows us the continuing, active violence of the archive, bringing us
close to “the pain experienced in [her] encounter with the scraps of the archive.”11 The
pain of unrecoverable loss, Hartman writes, “gives rise to longing,”--Venus’s violent
inscription in the record incited in Hartman a longing to rewrite Venus’s story, to offer
other possible states in which she could be preserved. Hartman shares her initial
reluctance to write about Venus, that she only mentioned her briefly in her book, *Lose
Your Mother*, because the proposition seemed too audacious. She explains that in *Lose
Your Mother*,

…I chose not to tell a story about Venus because to do so would have trespassed
the boundaries of the archive. History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact,
evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror. I
wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history--the rumors,
scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible
metaphors, chance events, and fantasies that constitute the archive and
determine what can be said about the past.”12

In her work on sixteenth-century French pardon tales and trials, Natalie Zemon
Davis also confronts the “fictions of history,” but in a different way. Rooted in such
vastly distinct historical contexts, the fictions that Davis faces in her work do not
perpetrate the same violence as the fictions in the “archives of slavery.” Her different
handling of those fictions, thus, does not contradict Hartman’s but rather, Davis
approaches from a different direction. She examines juridical proceedings in which the
subject is present for their archiving. Thus, in their testimonies and/or letters of
remission, these subjects, unlike Venus, have the opportunity to influence the way in

10 Ibid., 2
11 Ibid., 4
12 Ibid., 9
which they are written into the record. Furthermore, Davis studies how these historical subjects themselves craft the fictions that punctuate their inscription in the archive. In reading letters of pardon and remission, Davis writes, “I marvel at the literary qualities of these texts, or, I might say, the ‘fictional’ qualities, by which I mean the extent to which their authors shape the events of a crime into a story.” Her pause for marvel at these fictions contradicted everything she had learned as a student of history; she writes, “we were ordinarily taught as scientific historians to peel away the fictive elements in our documents to we could get at the real facts.” Yet, Davis found tremendous value in these texts,

[b]ecause they are one of the best sources of relatively uninterrupted narrative from the lips of the lower order (and indeed from others, too) in sixteenth-century France. Letters and memoirs from peasants and artisans are rare. Marriage contracts, wills, and other contracts are plentiful and tell us much about the actions, plans, and sensibilities of men and women who could not even sign their names at the bottom, but the documents themselves are dominated by notarial sequences and formulae. Letters of remission were also collaborative efforts, as we will see, but they gave much greater scope to the person to whom the notary was listening. Depositions and records of interrogations in criminal cases are extant for certain jurisdictions in the sixteenth century and are valuable indications of the way people recounted events.

But Davis does not ‘peel away’ the fictions latent in these depositions to get at the ‘real facts’ of peasant and artisan life. These fictions, for her, are integral to the historical value of these documents in two ways. The first, they evidence what she calls the ‘artifice’ of judicial discourse. These layers of artifice show us how persons in sixteenth century France performed themselves and their stories in trials. They reveal,

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14 Ibid., 3
15 Ibid., 5
like the theatricality of María’s trial, tropes about courtroom demeanor and performativity.

…the artifice of fiction did not necessarily lend falsity to an account; it might well bring verisimilitude or a moral truth. Nor did the shaping or embellishing of a history necessarily mean forgery; where that line was to be drawn was one of the creative controversies of the day.16

Second, these fictions are valuable because they show what marriage contracts and other less fictive records don’t: how people tell and perform their own stories. Although the fictions in these accounts manifest in similar forms as the fictions Hartman deplores, in “rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts…fantasies,”17 they are distinct in that they originate within the historical subjects themselves. While Venus’s personhood is mutilated by these fictions and the sealed in the record as such, the persons in Davis’s studies create these fictions in order to write themselves. While Hartman sets an intention write a narrative that “exceeded the fictions of history,” Davis intends to dive deeper these fictions. She writes,

I want to let the ‘fictional’ aspects of these documents be the center of analysis. By ‘fictional’ I do not mean their feigned elements, but rather, using the other and broader sense of the root word fingere, their forming, shaping, and molding elements: the crafting of a narrative.18

In another work, The Return of Martin Guerre, Davis similarly leans in to the ambiguities of identity, performativity, and deceit of the period. She picks her way through a sixteenth-century trial in which a Basque man, Martin Guerre leaves his village for several years and returns to find that, in his absence, an impostor has assumed his identity. Much of Davis’s study is about Bertrande de Rols, sometimes wife of the

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16 Davis, Fiction in the Archives, 5.
18 Ibid., 3
disappeared Martin Guerre and current bedfellow of the imposter, Arnaud de Tilh.

While Bertrande traditionally been cast as a victim, a woman duped by a conniving man, Davis explores the possibility that Bertrande was, at least to some extent, aware that the man sleeping in her bed was not her husband of several years. She plots out the possible configurations of Bertrande’s relationship with Arnaud—of corroboration in deceit, of a love affair, of a woman making a choice about her situation. Her work here in reconciling the collision of the personal and the social in relationships will inform my handling of María’s rather opaque relationship with her confessor.

Davis, further, asserts the possibility that Bertrande, like many other persons in history, may have been unusual—that she may not have fit the role that social historians now would cast for her. Davis asks questions that I would also like to ask of María and her mystical personae:

We often think of peasants as not having had much in the way of choices, but is this true? Did individual villagers every try to fashion their lives in unusual and unexpected ways?¹⁹

Davis imagines what Bertrande might hold, unsaid, within the confines of her brain. She calls attention to how, in past retellings of this story, historians (all but one, male) have denied Bertrande this capacity to think, to plot, to deceive, to shape her identity and life. Davis makes ample room to imagine how Bertrande’s rearing, experiences, desires, dreams, and her sense of self might have affected her actions. In doing so, Davis insists that, whatever the nature of these thoughts and feeling, Bertrande de Rols was a person who, like all persons, thought and felt everyday. In the absence of a

historical record of Bertrande’s interior thoughts and feelings, Davis must make decisions about how to ensure that we make space to acknowledge their existence and protect them collapse under pressures of documentary historicity. Davis writes,

I am willing to settle, until I can get something better, for conjectural knowledge and possible truth; I make ethical judgments as an assay of pros and cons, of daily living and heroic idealism.20

She thus inserts these conjectures as temporary wedges. Davis proposes for Bertrande fictive thoughts and feelings not to fix them as truth and not to seal Bertrande in the record as a certain type of character. Rather, Davis invents to open discourse around possibilities for interiority and personhood.

In insisting upon the personhood of María Cotanilla and her neighbors, I will, like Davis, propose possible interiorities not to fix them, but rather to insure that we include them in the narrative. For, the systematic exclusion of thought and feelings from our histories actively corrodes our understanding of historical reality. Barbara Rosenwein explains this corrosion with the title of her piece, “Worrying about Emotions in History”:

I do not worry about the emotions themselves: people in the past, as now, expressed joy, sorrow, anger, fear, and many other feelings; these emotions had multiple meanings then (as they do today); they had their effects on others and were manipulated in turn (as ours do and are). What medievalists—indeed all historians who want to get their history right—must worry about it how historians have treated emotions in history.21

Emotions, though not static or immutable, have always been a part of history. The “worrying,” rather, originates on the historiographical side: how can we properly treat these emotions, especially when, as Rosenwein’s study reveals, methodologies around

historicizing and documenting emotions have changed drastically and frequently? She first explains why emotions have traditionally been excluded from historical considerations:

As an academic discipline, history began as the servant of political developments. Despite a generation’s worth of social and cultural history, the discipline has never quite lost its attraction to hard, rational things. Emotions have seemed tangential (if not fundamentally opposed) to the historical enterprise.\(^{22}\)

Rosenwein’s assessment of the historiographical landscape suggests that historians have most often studied emotions with two overarching turns: towards the individual\(^{23}\) or towards the structural.\(^{24}\) Rosenwein proffers her own method for studying emotions in history, one which has informed my explorations of the feelings shared and held by the villagers of Colmenar:

People lived--and live--in what I propose to call ‘emotional communities.’ These are precisely the same as social communities--families, neighborhoods, parliaments, guilds, monasteries, parish church memberships--but the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling: what are these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, tolerate, and deplore.\(^{25}\)

While Hayden White does not argue for emotional histories specifically, his work on metahistory makes room for this kind of expansion and fictive study. Further, he offers us some theoretical terminology through which to justify how conjectured

\(^{22}\) Rosenwein, “Worrying About Emotions,” 821.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 834-7
In specific, she refers us to the hydraulic model where emotions surge within the person irrationally and the cognitive psychological turn in the 1960s towards the rationality of the individual’s emotions
\(^{24}\) Ibid. 831, 837, 824
She mentions, in particular, the Annales School, social constructivism, and the emotionological turn of the 1980s which studied public attitudes towards the expression of emotion.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 842
possibilities, or fictions, can help bring us closer to, and not further from, an understanding of historical reality. White makes a distinction between what is ‘true’ and what is ‘real.’ ‘Truth,’ argues White, concerns itself with the single chain of events that actually came out of a set of historical circumstances. But, if we are trying to understand a historical reality, he suggests, ‘truth’ might not be our most effective instrument. White holds that truth “can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what ‘reality’ consists of.”26 For, White says, “The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be.”27 Thus, to consider all the possibilities for what could have happened gives us a broader picture of a given reality than to only acknowledge the narrow set of outcomes that were actualized in the record. White topples our constructions of truth, fiction, actual, and real. To play out possibilities that did not actually happen is to create a fiction. However, this fiction is more real than the actual truth. White here asserts that fiction is not the opposite of truth—rather it is the expansion of truth. Our concerns, White maintains, in writing history should not be directed towards what untrue possibilities are included in our retellings but rather, what possibilities are excluded.28 It is these exclusions that corrode our historical record of reality, the fictive exclusions and not the fictive additions that perpetrate loss. He writes,

> Historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable.29

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27 White, “Historical Fiction,” 147.


29 Ibid.
This “effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable” returns us to Hartman’s critique of the gaping archive. While it was the fictions of Venus’s captors that mutilated her, that perpetrated the violent loss of her humanity in the record, it could be fictions that help us set out to reassert her personhood. Hartman sets out, thus, to exceed the fiction of the archive with her own fictive process. To write the ‘romance’ she longed to write, she employs a method she calls, “critical fabulation,”

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.

Hartman thus engages with the archive, picks apart the story’s elements and refashions them in a way that makes room for us to “listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory,” the sounds of Venus’s reality, sounds that may well have resonated within her body. She reminds us that these imagined possibilities for Venus do not recover what was lost; rather they “labor to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive…” This is thus an act of resistance, it is the construction of a ‘counter-narrative,’ an overhaul of a violent history on a methodological, formal, and intentional level. She nods to Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt who, in “Counter-

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31 Ibid., 11-12
32 Ibid., 3
33 Ibid., 11
34 Ibid., 12-3
History and the Anecdote,” write “Counter history opposes itself not only to dominant narratives, but also to prevailing modes of historical thought and methods of research.”

Hartman, Davis, and White all acknowledge that, in writing narratives from, with, and against, historical archives, the historian can certainly fail. In attempting to emplot, White concedes, a historian can ‘misfire’ and try to cram it into an ill-fitting narrative structure. However, he writes, “the important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways, so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings.” It is only by taking these leaps as historians that we can continue to fill out possibilities and realities of history beyond the constraints of the record. It is with this feeling of responsibility and resistance, that Hartman audaciously confronted the insufficiency of the archive to write the life of Venus. As the archive is still enacting violence, rewriting history is also, Hartman ventures, a project of liberation in the present and future. Envisioning/re-envisioning the past, she writes, is critical to “thinking our present” and necessary to helping us “imagine a future in which the afterlife of slavery has ended.”

However, she writes,

The necessity of recounting Venus’s death is overshadowed by the inevitable failure of any attempt to represent her. I think this is a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved.

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36 White, “Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” 84.
38 Ibid., 12
Hartman leaves us with unanswered and perhaps unanswerable questions about how to reconcile this failure, how to build a new narrative from the archive without exacting its deeply-entrenched violence. She asks,

> What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counterhistory, an aspiration that isn’t a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?  

Although these questions are daunting, Hartman embraces this productive and unavoidable tension in telling stories, because, given the violence of the archive, she writes, “it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.”

Like Hartman, Davis reveals her implication in shaping the narrative and her inevitable insertion of herself into her historical writing.

In historical writing, ‘where does reconstruction stop and invention begin?’ Is precisely the question I hoped readers would ask and reflect on, the analogy with the uncertain boundary between self-fashioning and lying built into my narrative.

Davis’s handling of the fictive, uncertain, and unknowable elements of the story largely inspired my formal choices. In her retelling the fabulous case of self-fashioning and fraud, Davis does not peel away the fictive. Rather, she injects it into the very formation of her historical writing. The reader must thus confront uncertainty on every layer of history—interior personhood, social positioning, testimony, archive, and, finally, historical writing. She never lets the reader forget the porousness, the fallibility, the insufficiency of our constructions that separate fact and fiction in history. In doing so,

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39 Ibid., 3
40 Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4
41 Davis, “On the Lame,” 572
Davis brilliantly implicates herself in this uncertainty to expose the historian’s role in concretizing and creating fiction in history.

I have set out to write the history of María Cotanilla drawing on the methods put forth by these history writers. My first chapter lays out a narrative foundation, a structure of emplotment upon we can stretch out María’s history, appreciate its complexities, examine its holes, and speculate as to what might we might have lost through them. We can ask what the inquisitors excluded and what possibilities we might include to fill out this history’s reality. I have sourced the materials constructing my emplotment directly from the transcription of María’s trial. In my narrative expansions, I have been careful not to contradict the history presented in the document. Rather, in my aim to construct/reconstruct a historical reality of this story, I have included what the document records *actually happened* and what possibilities *could have been*.

Experimenting with alternative historicities and forms, I have set up an apparatus to differentiate between the ‘true’ and the ‘possible’ in the narrative—what I have taken directly from the document and what I have conjectured. However, I wanted to disrupt the de facto privileging of the ‘true’ over the ‘possible’ in our assessments of historicity. Thus, I chose not to footnote what was document-sourced nor to mark it with superscripts. Rather, I have indicated in the end notes directly following the chapter which sections of my narrative are more textually-based and I have cited the testimonies and court documents from which I extracted them. Much of the dialogue, testimonies, letters, and court documents included in my narrative are directly quoted and translated from the original Spanish. I have sometimes shortened these quotations or made slight grammatical changes for legibility. Specifically, I have sometimes altered the pronouns and verb conjugations, into first person, especially in cases where the verbs are
inconsistent. A [Q] in the endnotes indicates that the text inside of a quotation marks (dialogue) or text in italics (written text) are direct translations. I have excerpted translated text directly from some original court documents. I have indicated these textual excerpts in italics, 1.15 line-spacing, and with a half-page indent. With this apparatus I sought to offer the reader the choice, to verify or leave ambiguous what is true and what is real. I have hoped to work with and strain against the historical archive and to inject a trace of uncertainty into every level of this history—even into my own retelling. I wanted to reserve this citation apparatus for the primary documentary sources from the trial, as to lend some transparency to when I was and wasn’t drawing from the documents, how I was used them, and where I might be inventing. I cite secondary sources that have informed the narrative section in my “Works Cited and Consulted” section.

I have preserved much of the document’s original emplotment, its juridical (and theatrical) format, telling the story in scenes, many of which take us into the courtroom and next to the witnesses as they testify. In this way, I have been able to preserve the fictions created by these witnesses as artifacts of their self-fashioning processes, to explore motives, and to bring us close to the theatrical stakes of the courtroom. I have chosen to unfold the narrative in scenes in order to channel that performativity. As most of María’s life (and all the villagers’ lives) did not take place in the courtroom, I have strayed from the juridical setting in order to brings us closer to every day life and intimate moments that witnesses recount in passing.

I have attempted to expand these moments, to open them up to the fullness of these persons and their realities. In August of 2015, I visited Colmenar de Oreja on a White Fellowship Grant. Walking around the narrow, cobble-stone streets, I looked and
listened for the sights and sounds that make and might have made the village come to life. I walked up along the valley’s edge, up to the pine grove, back down the Camino del Christo to the Plaza Mayor—then, the Plaza Nueva—and into María’s church where she sat down to invent every day. I have tried, like Hartman, to resurrect the visual and aural record lost over time. I have imagined how people moved about the little town, how they gathered, what they ate, and what they wore.

I have worked to flesh out the persons of this history in full bodies and minds. I have imagined their statures, their physical presence, and pain. In order to insist on the existence of unverifiable interiorities, I have critically fabulated some of the possible thoughts and feelings that might have stirred within these villagers. I have endeavored to survey what Rosenwein calls the ‘emotional communities’ within Colmenar, to explore relationships and economies of care, and how they might have motivated and shaped the villagers’ behavior.

While some of these imaginations stake greater risk for failure than others. The potential for over-determination of a historical person is graver in assigning them a malicious intent than picturing them in a salmon-colored dress. But these narrative risks that I have taken in my attempts to write María and her world into a fuller historical landscape are intentional, researched, and indispensable to my project. Through this form, my first chapter, wholly narrative, introduces us to the the trial, the characters, and their world and raises questions that we will tackle in greater detail and with more traditional historical analysis in the second and third chapters. It directs us to certain murky areas and floats some possible realities that we will test out and pick apart in the later chapters.
My second chapter studies questions of blindness raised in the trial. It opens wide certain doors left ajar in the first chapter and explores the ambiguities that lie behind them. I have assembled three episodes mentioned in the trial that will lead our analysis and direct our questioning. As in the first chapter, I have expanded these episodes, each originally recounted in one or two sentences of testimony, into scenes. The second chapter, however, takes on a different formal structure than the first. As it works to treat specific questions of blindness in depth, I have created a space after each scene for rigorous historical inquiry. We thus alternate between narrative episode and critical analysis, putting ‘fictive’ and fact-interested historical work in conversation. The narrative episodes, I hope, will help us burrow deep into the questions of María’s life and story, while the critical analysis will launch these inquires outwards into María’s world and moment. These analytic sections aim to not only put us in discussion with other historians, but also, to appreciate the many, many vast fields of historical work to which one woman’s story can lead us.

Scene 1 of Chapter 2, “Visions of Vision,” takes us into an in-depth consideration of María’s embodied experience of blindness. It lays out the little information that the trial offers about María’s blinding and blindness, and then invokes outside sources to help flesh out our understanding of what it meant to live as a blind woman, as La Ciega. I look at the historiography on the material culture of blindness and invoke some voices in disability studies in an effort to both understand its sparseness and to find ways to move beyond it. Scene 2 of

Chapter 2, “The Beckon,” examines the historical intertwine of blindness and mysticism and their contingency in María’s identity. It considers how the non-normative body has been debased and elevated in Christianity and, particularly, in María’s world.
Scene 3 of Chapter 2, “The Pañuelo Test” picks through the thorny ambiguities and patches of doubt that grow around María’s embodiment of blindness. It addresses early modern anxieties about non-normative bodies, in particular, the pervasive fears about disability fraud in beggars. This historical background will, I hope, help us to understand the villagers’ harsh surveillance of María’s body, their accusations that she feigned blindness, and their attempts to reveal her as a fraud.

In Chapter 3, we will explore the sexual and the demonic as they collide within María’s body and in the early-modern world around her. I have organized our study around five incidents mentioned in the trial that complicate and elucidate María’s experience in these corporeal modes. We will try to make sense of the relationship between María and her confessor and how its different possible configurations might change how we understand their testimonies and the stories they tell about each other. Among other topics, our study will take up early modern sexual norms and governance and the contemporary medical mysteries that shrouded the female body. This chapter’s form finds a medium between the first two. It begins with a narrative section composed of many scenes and ends with a section of analytics. The citations for the narrative section are located in the chapter’s end notes.

We find María Cotanilla in the disintegrating, warped, tea-brown transcription of her trial. We meet her in a position of social pariah, legal indictment, and in the custody of the Spanish Inquisition. This project in history writing aims to get to know her as she existed before, during, and after her path crossed with the Inquisition’s record. I have committed to holding always in mind that the document from which I am working was and is an instrument of coercive social control and violence against creativity and personhoods. It does not intend or purport to resurrect her; rather, it sets out to loose
her from the Inquisition’s sole custody, which has held her in its archive for three-
hundred and fifty years. The formal builds for her an alternative historical space in which
she can exist—a space that holds her as more than just ‘the accused.’ It is designed to
make room for the fullness and complexity of her personhood—her thoughts, feelings,
and her perpetual, mutually constitutive and creative imaginations of the world around
her. George Garret writes,

[T]o write imaginary history is to celebrate the human imagination...The subject
is the larger imagination, the possibility of imagining lives and spirits of other
human beings, living or dead, without assaulting their essential and, anyway,
ineffable mystery.  

It is not a perfect refuge and she will not fit neatly within its walls, but it is a beginning to
explore the possibilities for María and for historical writing by constructing imaginative
history for an imaginative person. This is history that sits with doors wide open to be
“shared by the living and the dead, of something beautiful, and forever joyously new.”

\[\text{George Garret, "Dreaming with Adam: Notes on Imaginary History," }\text{ New Literary}\]
\[\text{History 1, no. 3 (1970): 420.} \]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
Neighbors and Relations of the Accused

The Cotanilla-Trigo Household
María Cotanilla alias, La Ciega, the accused. Laundress and alms beggar. Blind woman. Age 28.
Francisca Trigo, mother of the accused. Deceased.
Juan Cotanilla, father of the accused. Turner. Deceased.
Isabela Valesteros, stepmother of the accused. Deceased.

The Ruiz Household
Ana Ruiz, landlady and cohabitant of the accused. Age 44.

The Mendietta-Sanchez Household
Quiteria Sanchez, friend and neighbor of the accused. Village gossip. Age 39.
Bernardo Mendietta, neighbor of the accused. Soap seller. Husband of Quiteria Sanchez.
Luísa Sanchez, friend and neighbor of the accused. Sister of Quiteria Sanchez. Age 33.
The ghost of Augustín Sanchez, brother of Quiteria Sanchez. Deceased.
The ghost of Luís, first husband of Quiteria Sanchez. Deceased.
Gerónima Sanchez, sister of Quiteria Sanchez.

The Pantoja-Bazan Household
Anita Bazan, friend and neighbor of the accused. Age 41.
Manuel Pantoja, neighbor of the accused. Husband of Ana Bazan. Age 47.
The ghost of Ana Bazan’s mother. Deceased.
The ghost of Manuel Pantoja’s father. Deceased.
The ghost of Ana Bazan’s father. Deceased.
Clergy and People of the Cloth

Friar Francisco Montero, *Confessor of the accused. Augustinian Priest and Friar.* Age 49.
Friar Maroto, *Former Confessor of the accused.* Age 38.
Father Gonzalez, *Priest.* Age 44.
Father Romero, *Priest.* Age 53.
Father Carrascosa, *Priest.* Age 35.
Madre Isabel de Jesús, *mystic and autobiographer of Arenas. Deceased.*

The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo

Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, *Commissary in the Inquisition proceedings against the accused.*
Don Garcia Paniagua, *inquisitor in the proceedings against the accused.*

Ana de Castillo. Age 39.
Antonio Bustos, *scribe.* Age 42.
Town Crier
Maria García, *auction shopper*
Clara Maroto, *auction shopper*
Commissary’s brother, *auction shopper.*
The Village Boys
The green grocer
The baker
The ghost of the Christian slave
The boy in the meadow.
Chapter 1.
The Life and Trial of María Cotanilla

ACT I.

Scene 1 – Her Arrest
The Home of Augustín Serrano
August 18th, 1675

We meet her on a Monday. It’s a workday. She has walked across town to the house of Augustín Serrano, where she is preparing the washing-tubs for laundry. She slides her hands into the bucking-basket of soiled garments, feeling for the finest ones. These she lays delicately at the bottom of the washing-tub and then lifts the basket, letting the workaday clothes tumble into the tub.

She is not surprised to hear a knock upon the front door, only that it is particularly brusque. She keeps her head down; her hands, submerged in the soapy water. Señor Serrano answers the door as if on cue. And the boots rush in—from the sound of it, dozens of them.

She’s known this day would come for some time now. I told him to burn the manuscript, she thinks to herself, I knew that they would come for us. The day the Ecclesiastical Visitor had come to town I said, “burn the book or be burned, Father…lost are we…” Lost then we were and now, all too soon, we are found.

She’s maybe filled the tub a little too high this time and as the booted men wrestle her arms behind her back, water spills over the lip and pools at her feet. The iron
shackles glide across the soapy residue on her wrists as the officers push her through the house and out front door. Señor Serrano’s shirts, forgotten in the tub, bob to the surface of the tub like ghosts.

Scene 2 – Her Assets
From the Desk of Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
August 25th, 1675

Besides Señor Serrano’s soaking shirts, María leaves little behind the day she is arrested. Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero dictates to his notary the following report:

I went to the house of Ana Ruiz, wherein the accused, María Cotanilla, commonly called, La Ciega, has resided for the past twelve years. Said Ana Ruiz showed me to the bedroom of the accused and I conducted the following inventory before sequestering her assets:

One bed of pine with headboard and footboard
One pillow and three sacks filled with straw that serve as cushions for the bed
Two sheets and a woolen blanket of poor quality
One new pine chest, inside of which, the following:
  One white fleece cloak and an old fan
  Five women’s shirts made of canvas and hemp
  A shirt sleeve and eight reales (on loan from Friar Montero)
A wad of combed flax
A shawl and a blue rag
A broom
A rosary of seven tens with a silver medallion and a cross
A sleeveless jerkin, an old gabardine coat, a wimple
Four yards of canvas in one piece and one and a half yards in another
A pocket knife
One pair of new shoes, another pair worn currently by the accused
Twenty-seven wads of uncured canvas of poor quality
One Santo Christo crucified and one reliquary of San Pedro in a silver box
One glass basin for holy water.
One skirt of French serge
One petticoat with of wool and gold trim, currently in the care of the tailor
Combined, her possessions hardly serve to cover her bare back or her bed. Now, I wait to be advised if I should sell them. It is my estimation that these goods are of such negligible worth that, even if it all sold, they could not yield more than two-hundred reales. This seems hardly enough to cover the costs of her imprisonment or of her trial. With all due respect, all of it will not sell; the whole endeavor might well be for naught.

The town crier makes his rounds, announcing the upcoming auction of the accused’s possessions, to be held on September 8th. The Holy Office has instructed him to advertise all day, every day, for seven days before the auction to garner interest. All week, he crisscrosses back and forth through the Plaza Mayor like a shoelace. By the 8th, he has wrangled a few customers.

María García buys the pine chest, with lock and key for forty-four reales.

The commissioner’s brother buys the petticoat for forty-four reales.

Anita Maroto buys the skirt of French serge for sixty-six reales.

Ana Ruíz peruses the auction. She watches the other customers fondle the objects that, for many years, she had only half-noticed perched throughout her house. Now, displayed here on this table, they seem sorely out of place. She quietly buys back the portrait of Christ for two reales, the broom for eight, and brings them home again. That afternoon, she hangs the crucifixion painting above her bed. By nightfall, she has moved it back to its usual place on María’s bedside table. She stands a moment in the middle of María’s dark and empty room. She wonders what María’s cell is like in the secret prisons of the Inquisition. Probably square and dark, like this one, she thinks. Square and dark like this, but not empty. Ana Ruíz leaves and shuts the door behind her.
Scene 3 – First Hearing of the Accused
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 27th, 1675

Six weeks after her arrest, María Cotanilla appears in court for her first hearing. She is led into the chamber by guards, followed in by a rattle, chains slithering across the floor behind her. They bring her to a wooden stool located in the very center of the courtroom.

A voice starts from the front of the room, “In the Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo, on the twenty-seventh day of the month of September of the year one thousand six-hundred and seventy-five, being the morning hearing of the inquisitor Don García Paniagua Pardo, who mandated that the accused be brought from the secret prisons. The accused took an oath to tell the truth in this hearing as in all the rest to come until the determination of her cause and to guard the secret of all that comes.” She promises, repeating the words carefully, exactly as she hears them.

It is a rather strange oath to take, for she will be the last person to know the secrets of all that comes. No one has told her the grounds on which she has been charged or when she will get her chance testify before the court. She has spent the past several weeks alone in the secret prisons, trying to imagine “the secrets of all that is to come,” trying to give them a landscape, a face, a voice. But what is to come looms unknowable before her, inextricable from the darkness of her cell. And whatever secrets she does have, she will keep, for she has no one to tell them to.

“Would the accused please state her name?”

“María Cotanilla, also known commonly as La Ciega, the blind woman.”

“…her age?”
“Thirty years, more or less.”

“…her place of birth?”

“Here, in this village of Colmenar de Oreja.”

“…and her office in life?”

María pauses. This question is the reason why she is here. It is this, her office in life, which is on trial before the Inquisition. For she has as of late, lived out two offices:

1) a laundress and 2) hearer of the unheard, messenger of the deceased, traveler to the unknown, wings for the souls of the suffering, of the forgotten, of the damned.

She clears her throat and leans forward, “I wash clothes.”

The inquisitor asks her genealogy as if she were a royal instead of an orphan. She answers as best she can, but she had so few years to ask her parents these sorts of things, so few years before questions about the future eclipsed questions about the past. María does not recall her grandparents’ names nor where they were from. She cannot say for sure whether she had uncles or aunts, though she vaguely remembers her mother mentioning a brother of hers, long dead now.

María does remember her mother, also long dead. She was beautiful and did beautiful things: kneading dough, braiding hair, throwing yellow corn for the chickens in the yard, pursing her lips to blow on a hungry flame, holding María’s chin in the soft hill of her hand. Her name was Francisca Trigo, which means wheat, which perhaps explains why she lingers so golden in María’s mind, so tall and wispy and thin-waisted, as if bundled in the middle. She died when María was only five years old. On the day of Francisca’s funeral, little María and her father stood side by side, dressed in their finest clothes. María’s father watched as they buried Francisca’s body in the churchyard. María,
however, did not watch. Or perhaps she had tried to watch, but could not quite see. It was right about this time that María began to lose her eyesight. From age five on out, María would be known by the villagers as La Cieguita, the little blind girl. When she became a woman, they would switch to La Ciega, the blind woman. Everyone would call her that, even those who suspected that she could see to some extent.

But back when her father died, when María was only eight years old, everyone believed she was blind. So, no one expected her to watch her father’s burial. Still, she returned to the gravesite and stood there. This time, she stood with her new stepmother and her finest black muslins now a bit too snug, a bit more worn than before. María’s father was a lathe-worker, a turner by trade and his name was Juan Cotanilla. He remarried a year after Francisca’s death and his new wife, Isabela Valesteros, would be María’s guardian for the next eight years—for longer than either of her parents ever were.

María says little else about this period of her life. She is, after all, in a drafty courtroom, where everything sounds hollow and is chased by the merciless scratch of racing quills. So when the inquisitor asks her to declare the discourse of her life, he does not seem to ask about grief, loneliness, missed breakfasts or drafty, sleepless nights. He does not seem interested in her stepmother’s character—if she was gentle or severe, good-humored or austere, if she loved María or resented her, if she ever stroked her hair or hit her. All María says about this period, from ages seven to fourteen, is that she began to work spinning yarn and that she prayed more and more, as her mother had taught her to.

María’s third visit to the gravesite, she went alone. She stood by as they buried Isabela and then she left entirely and utterly alone. She was fourteen years old; she had
no family, no guardian and no place to live. When Isabela died, María began to live day
to day, night to night, borrowed bed to barn loft—lingering a little longer in the nights
that met her with a mattress and pillow, skimming through the nights where she had
only straw beneath her. She worked hard, her fingers toughened from the spinning, her
palms thickened from the washing and the hanging out to dry. It was her knuckles,
however, that grew hardest. For even on her way back from a long day of work, she
would knock on each door to beg alms. It was her knuckles, not her hands, that earned
her the bowls of hot stew and the invitations inside.

Her neighbors were kind enough, opened their doors to her, obliged and
charitable enough. She was a poor thing, after all—so young with no family, no home, so
blind and so alone. As the villagers took turns taking her in, María came to them by the
particular rhythm of their gait, the climate of each pair of hands, the tell-tale smells of
each household: the Maroto household, leather and fine wine; the Mendietta-Sanchez
household, sweet like old flowers; the Pantoja-Bazan household, roast pork and onions.

Two years later, when she was sixteen, María found a home she could live in—
not just a place in which to sleep or spend the night, a home in which she could really
live. Ana Ruíz and her deaf sister, Lucía took María in and let her stay in a small
bedroom upstairs for very little money. Here, María lives from August of 1663 until her
arrest on August 18th, 1675—the day she left for work and never came back.

Lucía and Ana Ruíz were poor, but kind. María still had to knock on doors to
sustain herself, but it was different work to ask for rent money than for a night out of
the cold. She was still frequently offered bowls of stew or an invitation to dine, but
afterwards, she would walk back up the hill, to her little straw bed. Everything was
different. She remembers how the Ruíz sisters’ house smelled when she first entered it—
like kitchen smoke and watery millet—but she is so accustomed to it now that she hardly
notices anymore.

This late September day in court, as María sounds off these facts of here life, she
feels far from the María that lived them: Twelve years since she moved in with the Ruíz
sisters and smelled the smoke and millet. Fourteen years since Isabela died and she was
orphaned; fourteen years since she became homeless. Twenty-one years since she had a
father. Twenty-three since she had a mother and twenty-three years since she could see.
Never before has she told her genealogy or what the court calls the “discourse of her
life” in one sitting. Everyone in Colmenar de Oreja knows these facts of her life, but she
has never been the one to sit and tell them like that, start to finish.

Scene 4 – To Suppose, Presume, or Know
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 27th, 1675 – October 2nd, 1675 – October 3rd, 1675 – October 8th, 1675

The day of this first hearing, the inquisitor asks a question that will stalk María
into the courtroom for the next year:

“Do you suppose, presume, or know why you are here?”

On September 27th, 1675, the day of her first hearing, María answers as follows:

“I suppose I’m here because of a most unfortunate run-in with the village boys
and some terrorized barnyard fowl,” she pauses, “And my most profound love of the
Catholic doctrine. How wicked they were, those boys, dumping water of a flock of
roosters, just to hear them cluck a fuss. I heard the commotion and intervened straight
away. I told them that little boys must repent for such wicked behavior, that they must
confess their sins in the name of our Catholic doctrine. But the only time they came near
to the confessional, it was not for penance; it was to eavesdrop as I gave my confession.
And then they spread rumors to all the neighbors about what I had said. And I would just like to declare today, and I profess it in truth before this Holy Office: no matter what wicked gossip the village boys have spread, I never said I was a saint,” she pauses, “I am not a saint; I am a humble sinner.”

On that first day, the inquisitor responds slowly and deliberately, projecting his voice down from the bench:

“Let it be said that this Holy Office is not wont to apprehend any person without extensive information from multiple sources who heard, experienced, or saw the accused commit or say some thing that is, or seems to be, against our Catholic faith--some thing against the teachings of the Holy Mother Roman Catholic Church, or against the free rule and exercise of this Holy Office. And even then, one is apprehended only when there is cause to believe that the given information has been brought by reference of the Lord our God. And only then is the accused ordered to traverse her memory and to say that she has confessed entirely the truth of all for which she feels herself guilty.”

The room is silent save for the notary’s unyielding quill. He writes,

She said she had confessed the truth and that she did not have anything else to say and having read to her everything said in this first hearing, she confirmed that is is correctly written and the accused was mandated to return to her prison.

And the accused did not sign, as she does not know bow.
And signed, below, the said inquisitor,
Don Garcia Paniagua.

On October 2nd, 1675, the day of María’s second hearing, the inquisitor asks again:

“Do you suppose, presume, or know why you are here?”

On this second day, she answers as follows:
“I run all around my memory and all I can venture is this: that for the past six years they have rumored in this village that I have been possessed by demons. I don’t know if perhaps this is why you have brought me here, imprisoned, before the tribunal?”

The inquisitor answers sternly,

“Let it be said that for being possessed, by no fault of your own, you have not been brought prisoner before this Holy Office and let it be said once more that, by reference of God, one must tell the truth.”

The next day, María’s third hearing, the inquisitor does not ask. María spends the next five days alone in her cell. On one of those days, she tells the prison’s custodian that she would like to request an additional hearing before the Holy Office.

On October 8th, 1675, they grant her request and she comes before the court again.

“It is asked that the accused declare why she has requested another hearing and that she tell the truth.”

María clears her throat, smooths a flyaway hair from her face,

“I have requested this fourth hearing to tell Tribunal that they should serve me justice.”

She hears the almost imperceptible sound of heads pivoting, the slightest shifting of weigh. The inquisitor responds, tentatively,

“What does that mean to say exactly—that the Tribunal should serve you justice?”

“What I mean to say is that they should punish me if I deserve it,” she answers, her voice growing louder. She can hear the inquisitor part his lips. He is looking down at her from the corner of his eye.
“Why do you presume that they should punish you?”

“I don’t know!” she cries out. “If I were to know that, I would confess on the instant!” She exhales heavily and the inquisitor responds,

“Let it be said that it is not plausible that the accused requested the hearing only to say that the Tribunal should serve her justice and, by reference of God, she is admonished to declare, and to declare in truth, why she requested another hearing before this Tribunal!”

She waits for the room to swallow up his echo. Then, she leans forward and answers dryly,

“I do not have more to say than what I have said.”

The notary looks down at the trial record and folio 172 stares blankly back. He has absently rested halfway down on the page where it has leaked a sizeable blot of ink. He turns to the next clean page and writes,

The accused was mandated to return to her cell.
And she does not sign, as she does not know how.
And below signed the said inquisitor,

Don Garcia Paniagua.

Scene 5 – The Field Voles of Colmenar
The Secret Prisons of the Inquisition
The evening of October 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1675

María seethes in her cell. She imagines each of her neighbors shuffling in and out of the courtroom, one by one, sitting on the same wooden stool she had occupied for so many hours that week.
The inquisitor had said they’d received ‘extensive information’ to warrant her arrest. *What did they say about me? And who, who in God’s name, had said it? Father González? Perhaps. Always had it out for me. Manuel Pantoja, could it be? Certainly could be. Who of my neighbors and friends, who had the nerve—* She scratches circles into the floor with one hand— *Who had the nerve to testify against me one day and kiss me in church the next, ‘Peace be with you, sister?’ Whoever it was, they were under my nose this whole time, watching me with beady, vermin eyes.*

She thinks she’ll be sick.

In all those years of almsgiving, soup ladling and bed lending, the villagers of Colmenar have amassed a great heap of stories about María—some of which she may not even remember herself. They collect these stories and secrets about everyone they know, bury them in underground for later perhaps. They don’t necessarily know why they do it, but something about a small town compels them. *Like autumn Field Voles preparing for winter,* María thinks. *Greedy and witless, always hungry for a secret to hoard.*

**Scene 6 – The Rational and Prudent Persons of Colmenar**  
From the desk of Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, Commissary  
July 16th, 1675

Three months before that evening in her cell and one month before her arrest, the notary takes down a letter that the Commissary dictates:

> Regarding the question of whether or not to bring the accused woman before the Inquisition:  
> I would make a swift judgment; I fear that in delay, there is risk of great scandal. At the very least, her seizure would remedy against her promulgating further absurd antics as you will see articulated in the testimonies already collected.
These testimonies, dutifully provided by the honorable neighbors of this village of Colmenar de Oreja make clear:
It is the overall opinion of these rational and prudent persons—and the opinion of myself—that this woman is a grand deceiver. That she seeks material gains and corporal conveniences by means of false communicative gifts and feigning sainthood.

The present notary to your sanctity, whom God holds in good grace.
Signed,
Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, Commissary

The roster of witnesses indicates that by this date, a month before María’s arrest, the following witnesses have already testified. María, of course, will never see this list, but these were the rational and prudent villagers, the neighbors whose testimony gave warrant to her arrest:

Father Diego Gonzalez, Priest  May 2nd, 1675
Father Diego Romero, Priest  May 4th, 1675
Friar Julio (tk) Carrascosa, Priest (tk)  May 13th, 1675
Father Friar Julio Maroto, Priest  June 6th, 1675
Antonia Fernandez, neighbor  June 27th, 1675
Quiteria Sanchez, neighbor  June 28th, 1675
Luísa Sanchez, neighbor  July 8th, 1675
Quiteria Sanchez – 2nd testimony  July 8th, 1675
Sebastian Nevarro, neighbor  July 10th, 1675
Father Diego Gonzalez - 2nd Testimony  July 11th, 1675

Scene 7 – The Eve of Quiteria Sanchez’s Testimony
The Mendietta-Sanchez household
June 27th, 1675

Quiteria Sanchez is widely held as the village gossip. She tends towards salmon-colored skirts and her husband, Bernardo Mendietta, owns a soap factory. She’s known
María for decades and on that June evening before she goes to testify at her trial, Quiteria stays up watching the fire. She digs deep into the recesses of her mind and unearths her collection of memories of María Cotanilla. Quiteria imagines herself kneeling, all these memories spread around her, picking up each encounter, each conversation, and examining them one by one. Here, a memory of adolescent María, sucking marrow from a chicken bone, ravenous. Here, a slightly older María stopping by on her way back from work for an empanada or two on a day when Quiteria had been feeling particularly lonely. She remembers on several of these occasions feeling grateful for the company of another lonely person.

Here, a memory from long ago, perhaps from when Quiteria was newly wed to her first husband. María was pre-pubescent then, maybe seven or eight, unbathed but polite enough. She is telling Quiteria a secret, leaning in from the very front of a kitchen chair, feet swinging under the table between them.

“When I was five years old,” she half-whispered the way that children do, “I wanted a skull, you know, to keep in my room and one day, I found one. I hid it in my bedclothes during the day and every night I took it out, placed it on top of a stick, and would pray before it—I said one Padre Nuestro and one Ave María. Then, one day, I met a gap-toothed girl. Her mouth was empty, like a cave and she was kind, so I wanted to help her.” Little María, now practically standing up with her elbows on the table, inched closer to Quiteria. “That night, I took the skull out and placed it on the stick and tried to yank out one of its teeth to give to the girl. It had so many, you see, and the girl so few. I pulled and pulled at the tiny tooth until all of a sudden, from its atop its wooden spine, the skull began to scream. It screamed and screamed and gave me such a fright that I fell
ill. And I had to lay in bed, practically dead, for a whole week.” Quiteria had looked a minute at the little girl, so wide-eyed and beautiful and dirty.

_That girl has either a lot of God or a lot of the Devil in her_, Quiteria thought to herself on that night, twenty years ago. She will say the same thing about María when she testifies in court the next day.

**ACT II.**

**Scene 8 – A New Confessor, A Brink**

*The Parish Church*

*March 14th, 1673*

María Cotanilla first meets Friar Francisco Montero in the early spring of 1673. He introduces himself to her after church and she is struck by the warmth of his hands. La Ciega can discern quite a bit about a person from their hands, but she is surprised to learn, later on, that he is nearly fifty years old. He has come to Colmenar de Oreja from the Augustinian Convent in the nearby town of Chinchón. She doesn’t know why he has come to Colmenar and, although a little skeptical, she is pleased by his arrival. The other clergy of Colmenar have all been so cold of late and she is as tired of them as they are of her. Until recently, she had confessed to Friar Maroto, a plump man with a nervous sweating habit. He had been uneasy around her for sometime, never knew what to say in response to her visions and ecstatic encounters. Earlier that year, he had given up all together. He had dropped her like a hot kettle and had been avoiding her ever since. She is sure that the other clergy had convinced him to do so—Father Gonzalez, ornery and
sharp-featured, almost certainly had it out for her. *And that mousy-voiced Father Romero does too,* she thinks.

She first confesses to Friar Montero on March 14th, 1673. She likes the way he listens—quiet and still, like a cup waiting to be filled. María goes to confesses to the Friar every day. She shows up to the church gates with the sunrise and stays late into the afternoon. The other congregants note the long hours, the private conversations between them, the evening strolls up past the well to the summit, all those gaping moments of confession, only the valley and its tall yellow grasses as witness.

*She often goes to the Friar’s house alone, Quiteria observes, she does his wash and, my husband says, he even lends her money to buy fine soaps.*

Friar Montero is also pleased with the arrangement. This woman he has met is inspiring. The visions and ecstasies she confesses are marvelous—every week, more and more so. They enthrall him through his long walks home, dancing in his mind like shadows against the last stretches of daylight. He feels he is standing on the brink of some great and numinous unknown.

**Scene 9 – A Visit from Anita Bazan’s Mother**

**The Pantoja-Bazan household, on the edge of town**

**March, 1674**

It is early one morning when María knocks on the door of the Pantoja-Bazan household. Anita Bazan answers, her auburn curls loose about her shoulders, nightshift lagging sleepily about her ankles. Her eyes have been swollen red since her mother’s death; for the past five weeks, she has barely slept. Anita opens the door and María
rushes in. Sweat soaks the flyaway hairs around María’s face and they cling to her cheek in hard black lines.

“Oh Anita,” she pants, gripping her friend’s shoulder to pull herself upright. “I have news for you.”

Anita Bazan helps María inside and into a chair at the kitchen table. “Something to drink, please,” María croaks. Anita obliges. Anita pours a splash of port into a greenish glass and watches María drain it in a single gulp. “Well, what is it, María?” Anita Bazan asks as she retrieves the empty cup.

María waves her closer, “Sit down for this, dear.” Anita sits and María starts, “I was visited late last night in my bedroom. I awoke to the sound of muffled sobs. ‘Hello? Who’s there?’ I stammered and heard no response. ‘Speak!’ I demanded, but there was only silence until finally, a voice answered:

‘María, it is I.’

The voice was frail and low, but unmistakable…it was none other than your mother’s.”

Anita’s legs lurch as if she has just been dropped from a considerable height.

“Are you the mother of Anita Bazan? Are-are you her ghost?” I asked.

‘Yes María, it is I.’

I wept to hear her voice, all warm breath and cotton, as it was when she was alive.

‘María,’ she said, ‘I have come to give you an important message that you must deliver to my dear daughter, Anita. Tell her I have been all this time in Purgatory, suffering. It is grey there,’ she said, ‘and at night, it is so, so cold. Tell Anita that my time there is almost up, that I am so close to leaving, so close to
arriving home to God in heaven. But I need her help: tell Anita that she must say four masses for me—one at the altar of Santa Ana—and that she must give one Maravedís de Vellón to finance prayers for me. Tell her I want to be with the angels, to be dressed in white, to walk barefoot on a cloud.”

Anita’s mouth opens as if to respond, but instead just gapes, lips hanging limp like a river fish. María says goodbye and kisses Anita’s cheek, carrying some incidental tears out with her into the thick morning air. Anita remains seated. She thinks that she will never stand up again, that perhaps her feet, suddenly turned lead, might, with a single step, shatter the delicate miracle that La Ciega had just delivered her. She watches her tears fall on the kitchen table and stares at the ripple patterns in the wood grain until her husband, Manuel, awakes hours later. Breakfast sounds fill the otherwise silent room, bread crust breaking into crumbs and knives on plates.

Later that day, Anita walks on heavy legs to the church. She finds Friar Montero preparing to leave for the evening. He addresses her before looking up.

“I believe I know why you are here,” says the Friar, before Anita even opens her mouth to speak.

“Is it true?”

“It is, Señora. It is all true. La Ciega came to me this morning at dawn to tell me everything that happened. What a gift that your mother’s soul found her way to our sister. What a gift that you can help her into heaven so soon. Five weeks in Purgatory is a blessing—many suffer there for years and years, but not your dear, dear mother, devoted Catholic, gentle soul. O Anita, give thanks!” He places a warm hand on Anita Bazan’s rather skeletal hands, which are folded tight on the table between them.
She looks down, “I have brought the money, the alms to finance the four masses and the maravedís de vellón for the prayers.” Anita takes from her pocket a satchel, filled with the money she had counted and recounted on her kitchen table after La Ciega had left. She dumps the coins on the Friar’s desk.

“Good, good, sister,” Friar Montero says sweetly, leaving them untouched in a golden pool before him. “And did you bring the one-hundred and forty reales for our sister?”

Anita tugs an auburn curl at the back of her head. “I—I don’t think María said anything about paying her.”

“Hmm…” says the Friar, looking at her thoughtfully from beneath a furrowed brow. “Perhaps our sister, La Ciega, was too humble to ask you for it. She told me this morning that your mother wanted you to give one-hundred forty reales for her messenger, La Ciega, the poor blind woman, who heard her cries, who received her soul.”

That night Manuel falls asleep long before Anita does. She lies awake next to him, praying and waiting for sleep or dawn—whichever comes first. When a trickle of light leaks in through the window, she swings her legs over the side of the bed. She moves gingerly so as not to wake Manuel. Sitting at the kitchen table, she counts out the one-hundred and forty reales for the blind woman. She clutches the satchel tightly, so that no coin should clink against another. By the time the sun rises, Anita Bazan is dressed and on her way to see Friar Montero.

For the second time, Anita spills the contents of her little purse onto the table between them. “Please give this to our sister, La Ciega, on my behalf. I should not want
to bring her shame by delivering it to her myself.” Friar Montero nods knowingly and Anita goes to sit in the empty chapel until mass begins.

A few weeks go by. Every night Anita lies awake, hoping her mother might visit her as well—that she might hear her mother’s voice once more. She fears that if she were to sleep, she might not hear her mother’s cries. Anita leaves the bedroom door and window open all night long and brings her rosary into bed with her. Every day, Anita goes to mass and sits a few pews behind La Ciega, unable to take her eyes off her. Anita says the four masses, one at the altar of Santa Ana, she says the prayers for the dead, and lingers after church each afternoon to bid María good day. Each time she leans in for a kiss, she hopes for a whisper in her ear, some news of her mother—anything. One day, it comes. “Walk with me,” María breathes in her ear, “I have news.”

They go arm in arm up to the path along the valley. María is silent until there are well outside the village bounds. Anita tugs the curl at the back of her head. Suddenly, María stops and turns to face the valley before them,

“She came to me, Anita. She appeared rejuvenated, with tears of joy brimming in her eyes. She said,

‘Dear Ciega, tell my daughter that I am most grateful to her. Because of the four masses and all her prayers for me, I have finally been called to heaven. Tell her I will ascend to meet God with a circle of angels about me, all dressed in white, feet bare and white on the clouds below.’”

María’s voice cracks,

“Then, she said to me,

‘Gracias, my dear Ciega. God is pleased with your work.’”
María lets a tear or two roll down her cheeks and into the corners of her mouth. Anita unwraps the curl from around her finger. She throws her arms around María’s neck and lets some of her weight fall onto La Ciega’s back. That night, Anita sleeps for the first night in weeks and dreams of fresh cream.

Scene 10 – Word Travels
The Village Center
March, 1674

Word travels through town as it usually does, “like lice,” Quiteria Sanchez always says. News of La Ciega’s visit from the ghost of Anita Bazan’s mother is everywhere—hanging over dinner tables, in the amber dregs of ale glasses, behind the cupped hands of whispering school children.

Quiteria has been especially infatuated with the whole ordeal. She scrubs a large platter, it seems that not a day goes by without murmurings of La Ciega’s spiritual inclinations filling the air. My how the villagers’ months do run. The whole town wants to hear tell of La Ciega’s visions and knowing that I am one of her most trusted confidants, the villagers stop me in the streets to ask me what news I have. Every time I go on errands into the center, the excursion takes no less than three hours—or four!

For a curious woman such as Quiteria, this is a most excellent problem to have. While Quiteria might not notice, she quite often initiates these exchanges. She can hardly help herself. La Ciega’s stories nest in Quiteria’s hair, clinging to her salmon-colored skirts as she bustles about town and she passes them on to whomever comes near. Whether out of genuine interest or neighborly obligation, the other villagers listen.
She chatters to the green grocer:

“Wait until you hear what La Ciega told me the other night,” she says, leaning over the counter between them. The balding man offers an absent, ‘O?’ and continues to count yellow onions. Quiteria continues,

“She told me that, after church one day, she went walking through the meadows on the other side of the valley. It was a perfectly pleasant, nothing unusual about it. Until she heard a most wretched sound by the stables. And you will never guess whence such a sound came, Señor,” she pauses as if expecting a guess, and when none comes, she continues, “It came from an ass. A stocky, young donkey. And why did his braying sound so positively wretched, you might ask?” The grocer bends down to stack a wooden crate on another wooden crate. “Well, this donkey was in the midst of … O, I can hardly say it out loud; it’s actually quite obscene.” Quiteria tries to catch the grocer’s eye as he straightens from his crouch. “This donkey, I tell you, was engaging in a carnal act… with two young women—cousins, they were.” The grocer, now upright, folds his arms and blinks at Quiteria. “Can you imagine, the three of them, completely absorbed in this most sinful ruckus? Now, I do not know the details, and frankly, I would rather not.” Quiteria laughs, but truthfully, she is the slightest bit curious as to the physical logistics of such a sexual act, but it seems in poor taste to ask. “So, La Ciega approached the three bestial participants and halted this most sinful, heinous act.

‘You are committing a most sinful and heinous act,’ she says to them, I think, or something to that effect. ‘You must stop this behavior immediately and confess all of this to the priest.’

So, La Ciega left and returned to the meadow the next day to verify that they had been yet to confess. And, walking by that same pasture, she heard the wretched braying of the
coital beast yet again. There they were, the two cousins, in the throws of carnal sin with this gruesome jack. She halted them again, ‘Have you been to confess your egregious sins?’ They hadn’t, of course. But La Ciega, virtuous as the day is long, did not lose her temper. She said to them,

‘Tell me, sisters, what compels you to behave in such a way?’ And the two young women responded:

‘It was three years ago now when we came through this meadow and saw this young beast, braying and alone. We came up to comfort and caress the poor beast, who has been left all alone in this meadow. We were young and wondered if it was a jack or a jennet.’

So the girls checked the generative member of the beast and were…well…I suppose they were quite impressed,” Quiteria laughs rather nervously. The grocer scratches his head.

“So, La Ciega, sat the girls down and explains to them the evils of sin and the sacrament of penance and until they understand and finally, she convinces them to go and confess. Imagine that, can you? And La Ciega told this to me and my husband, Bernardo, over supper,” Quiteria laughs. “Never a dull meal with La Ciega, I assure you that.” The grocer blinks and tries to remember how many onions he had just counted.

Quiteria chatters to the baker:

“It is not every day you hear something so remarkable as this: I was talking to La Ciega the other evening and she told me that angels came into her bedroom deep into the night—four beautiful little angels—and they lifted her right out of her body, as if she weighed nothing at all. They lifted her up and carried her to…O, it’s just so remarkable,”
she exclaims as the baker dips his hands in small bath of flour. Quiteria hushes her voice for effect, “They carried her to the pits of hell…” The baker absently wipes his newly-floured hands onto his already flour-white apron. “They flew just over the fiery pits, the brimstone, the anguished souls and their anguished cries. Can you imagine how awful the sound? And then the angels carried her on, flying over a series of vast plains and she heard the wrenching pleas of souls suffering, ‘this must be the cleansing fires of Purgatory,’ she thought. She listened for voices of souls she knew and wept. She flew on the wings of her angels for so many days. Until finally, with one angel holding each of her limbs, they brought her up into…” Quiteria finds the baker’s eyes setting into her own. “They brought her up into heaven. Can you imagine that? Heaven. And those six days, her body was ambling around this little village, empty as a burlap sack. The angels finally returned her to earth on the sixth night. They laid her carefully on top of her own body and she sunk right in. She went the next day to her confessor, the Friar Montero, you know of him, I’m sure. She asked him,

‘Friar, have I been acting strangely for the past six days?’ and the Friar looked at her curiously and responded,

‘Well, no, you came here to take communion as usual, you walked home, went to work?’ It is truly such a marvel: her body went to communion without her and all those days she was so very far away and, what’s more, no one even noticed. We can be so thick sometimes, I tell you. All that happens right before our eyes that we do not notice and all the goings-on of the unseen world. It really makes one think, doesn’t it?’

“Mmm,” says the baker and he dips his hands in flour once again.
Later that week, Quiteria invites her sister, Luísa, over to her house for the afternoon. They chatter as they always have, since they were little girls. Luísa sits, in a butter-colored dress, watching her sister absent-mindedly sweep and re-sweep a dust pile into different oblong shapes.

With Quiteria so occupied, Luísa conducts the chatter:

“The saints have begun to visit her bedroom, she tells me. Sometimes in great throngs—The Virgin, San Augustin, San Francisco, San Antonio. She told me that one time they had all gathered in her bedroom and they were visited by a perturbed soul, a Christian slave in the house of a Moor. The soul began to grovel at the feet of San Antonio for he mistook him for God. And La Ciega had to placate the poor soul and assure him that San Antonio was not God. San Antonio in her bedroom, imagine, and the Virgin, too. Just remarkable.”

The sound of pebbles on pebbles draws Quiteria to the window. She never lets a passerby go unseen or un-greeted. Resting the broom against the shutters, Quiteria tips her upper body over the window frame and, on the tips of her toes, squints to look up the road.

“Here she come now,” Quiteria drops back onto the soles of her feet and picking the broom up again in a single motion. Luísa greets María at the door and they exchange pleasantries. The three women fill the kitchen with chatter and skirts and intermittent peals of laughter and the dust pile sits in the corner.

“Tell us, María,” Luísa says, “What is heaven like?” Without noticing, the sisters each rest a cheek in their palms.

“O, Heaven is full of all the most wonderful things,” María says, breathily. “In heaven, there are enormous windows made entirely of glass. Each window stretches on
and on—like a river turned on its head, running up and up and up. And engraved onto the surface of these windows, so smooth and so clear, are the most exquisite letters, gleaming in gold.”

Quiteria sighs in a quiet ode to beauty everywhere.

Luísa interjects, “I must say I am curious, María: If you are blind, how can you see all this—the glass windows and the gleaming letters?”

“You see, Luísa,” La Ciega responds, patiently, “ever since I was a little girl and lost my sight, I have prayed to God that I might one day hold a book, cradle its leathery spine, smell the breath of each page as it turns. And I prayed, above of all, that I might one day have the chance to read. God, hearing these prayers, year after year, answered them and conceded that there, in heaven, I should be able to see—the angels, the windows and all the other wonders—and that I should be given the chance to read a few letters. I couldn’t tell you the names of the letters I saw. All I can say is that they were so beautiful, each its own golden acrobat, tumbling into itself, legs splayed in the air, arms outstretched.”

They sit for a moment with the brief lull in conversation. Then, María puts a hand on each knee and stands up slowly,

“Well I suppose I shall be on my way then.”

Luísa answers, “Yes I suppose it is getting rather late.”

Quiteria is visibly distressed. Luisa knows that look well: her sister is struggling to hold her tongue.

“Wait!” She lets the word slip from her pressed lips. “If you please, María, I simply cannot contain my curiosity.” María leans back in her chair.
“I wonder,” Quiteria takes a deep breath. “I wonder if I might ask you a favor for the next time you visit heaven, hell, and purgatory. I don’t even know why I so badly care to know, but I would like you to look for my late first husband on your next voyage. Ever since you began voyaging back and forth between this world and the next, I have not gotten him out of my head. I must know where he is, how he fares, and how he sounds. And please, please, don’t tell Bernardo; it will only upset him and I love him, I do. But would you do the mercy of finding my Luís for me, dear friend?

Scene 11 - Meeting of Concerned Clergy
The home of Friar Maroto
May 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1675

Friar Maroto has the village clergy to his house for a meeting at Father Gonzalez’s sharp behest. They are joined by Father Romero, especially mousy in an oversized armchair. Friar Maroto has invited Anita Bazan’s husband, Manuel Pantoja, and is pleased that he accepts. When Anita Bazan told Manuel all that happened with her mother and La Ciega, he was happy for her. But, when she told him about the money and the 140 \textit{reales} for La Ciega, Manuel couldn’t hide his feelings of ill-ease. He had confided all this to Friar Maroto, who replied, “Manuel, brother, I most certainly understand your concern.”

Father Gonzalez calls the meeting to order.

“Gentlemen,” he begins, “I thought we should gather here to discuss the rumors about town regarding certain communications and visitations between this world and the
beyond,” he leans back in his chair. “It has come to my attention that a certain person in this village claims to have visited Purgatory and Hell and that, on several occasions, said person has encountered the suffering souls therein, talked to them, and led them into Heaven.” His eyes shoot from from clergyman to clergyman. “I think we all know to whom I am referring, gentlemen,” the corners of his lips curl upwards. “I am referring, of course, to our very own neighbor, La Ciega.”

Friar Maroto interlaces his sausage-like fingers, “Trouble this woman; she is trouble. On the exterior she seems so good, so righteous, confessing and taking communion daily. But she’s trouble, wrapped in a cloak of virtue. All of there miraculous propositions are utter nonsense—a wild delusion at best!”

Manuel Pantoja leans his forehead in his hands, as if speaking to the floor, “A delusion at best, and at worst?”

Scene 12 – The Friar Makes a Call
The Village of Chinchón
October 12th, 1673

Friar Montero leaves before dawn. The road to Chinchon isn’t long and he’s walked it countless times. The path is empty, save for the hungry October air that bites a little at his ears.

He’s exhausted—been waking up at odd hours of the night, gasping for breath. He can’t shake his mother’s words from his mind: “troubled sleep means trouble.” But as he approaches Chinchón, he takes a level of comfort in the familiar daybreak sounds that, for years, awoke him gently each morning.
He makes his way to the church to see his former priest, his Maestro, Father Sequeyros. They embrace and the Maestro’s familiar silver beard cascades over Friar Montero’s shoulder.

“Maestro,” Friar Montero says, “I have come across something—one extraordinary.” The Friar reaches into his bag, pulls out the rolled up manuscript, and slides it across the table to the Maestro. Friar Montero’s voice comes out higher than usual, flustered, “I have consulted other learned men and they have all told me to open my eyes to the grave risk I am taking with her. But my eyes are wide, Maestro, they are taking in the wonders of this woman. I just cannot look away.”

The Maestro reaches across his desk and slides the manuscript towards him. He picks at the knotted twine till it’s loosed. Both men watch the twenty pages spill across the desk. The first line of text catches on the corner of the Maestro’s eye:

_Trusting that which the divine Majesty, by His grand mercy, has given me to be true…_

“Leave me here to read a while,” he says.

Friar Montero spends the day visiting a few old companions at the convent but by dusk, he can wait no longer. He returns to the church to see the Maestro. Wiry beard between his fingers, the Maestro sits exactly where Friar Montero had left him. He’s rolled up the manuscript again, even more neatly than it was before.

“Well?” Montero asks. The Maestro sits a moment, trying to still the Friar’s restless eyes with his own, amber set.

“Brother, I see nothing here that violates our Catholic faith. Continue on, record the wonders that this most extraordinary woman tells you. Keep writing; wonders stick to ink like flies. And remember, it is your duty to listen, not to fear.”
Friar Montero embraces the Maestro before setting out to return to Colmenar de Oreja. Just before the Friar leaves, the Maestro hands him a small book. Montero pockets the gift and holds it close to his breast the whole way back to Colmenar.

Scene 13 - The Maestro’s Gift
The Meadows, The Ruiz household
The next day - October 13th, 1673

María decides she will carry around the book that Friar Montero gave her just in case she should happen upon someone willing to read her another few pages. She will carry it, also, because it is the first book she has ever owned and she loves it.

He has brought it home for her from Chinchón—“A gift from the Maestro,” he says with a theatrical flourish and she smiles. “He has read the beginnings of the book of your life and he thinks you are wondrous.”

“You mean to say that you showed him the manuscript? That is such marvelous news!”

They are both so giddy that morning and, for the first time, María imagines the Friar as a young boy.

She sits down on a bed of pine needles that looks out on the valley below.

“Read me the first chapter, won’t you?” she pleads sweetly, “If it please you to read to a haggard old blind woman.” He watches her throw her head back and laughs.

He opens the book, licks a thumb and finds the title page,

“The Life of the Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesús, Cloistered Augustinian of the Convent of San Juan Bautista in the Village of Arenas. Dictated by her, with an Additional Telling of Her Blessed Death”
The Friar reads her the first chapter and then they part ways. Isabel de Jesús, this book of her life, and all her visions and ecstasies, accompany María as she walks home through the pastures. She imagines young Isabel, “rustic shepherdess,” as she called herself, tending the ewes as they chewed and chewed and chewed the grass as if that was all that mattered.

When she arrives home, María flips through the pages, breathing in the musty air trapped between them. “Ana, dear,” she sings, “would you read me a selection from this most fascinating book? The Friar prescribed that I should read it—a sort of spiritual study.” Ana Ruíz is weary. She has been tending to the fire, bending and bellowing, wondering why the little flames so keenly desired to die. Ana can only read a little, but thinks the practice will do her good—the practice and a moment’s rest. She kneels by the meager fire and María lets her legs stretch out in front of her. Lucía, Ana’s sister, hugs her calves to her chest.

Ana Ruíz turns to a random page, coughs up a little hearth smoke, and begins,

“One day the Lord revealed to me his most holy heart, saying that he was engorged and that he could not find anyone to relieve his…breasts…?” Ana squints. It had been a while since she had last practiced her reading, perhaps she had erred. María tilts her head to the ceiling, wrinkles her forehead, “Mmm…go on.”

Ana Ruíz shrugs, blinks, and continues,

“I understood the breasts of his mercy…He told me that because his children had fallen ill he had nursed dogs. I understood that since God’s people rebelled against Christ, the living Son of God, they became ill, refusing his divine word; the children whom he loved so dearly rejected his divine…uh, breasts…, so he offered them to the gentiles, who were the dogs. I understood it well, because I had experienced the same thing; when my children were ill and when they died, I breast-fed the children of
The three women sit in silence a moment. “I think that shall do for now, no?” Ana says, closing the book a little too sharply for María’s liking. Lucía says nothing. She is deaf and, while she is not particularly inclined towards readings aloud, she has most enjoyed watching her sister’s facial features twist and pucker in bewilderment.

“It speaks to me, I think,” María says. Ana rolls her eyes, but only slightly, for she suspects that María can sense even the quietest expressions of lassitude. “What is a body if not a provisional container for all that presses forth, all that pours from within us. Insufficient, improvised, a sorry sack bursting at the seams. And you know, as I think more on it, it seems almost perfectly obvious that Jesus Christ should bear breast milk.”

Lucía watches María’s arms tie some imaginary knot above her head as she gesticulates. María stays a while by the fire and wonder how her life will sound read aloud, once it is finished, and bound. She wonders, too, who might one day read it.

The next morning when Ana awakes, she cannot help but shake the feeling that she had dreamed of dogs—that the house was filled with many starving pups, that she had suckled as many as she could until her breasts were dry and sore. Then, she had watched the remaining unfed puppies die.
Since his reassuring meeting with the Maestro, Friar Montero feels he can finally breathe again. He had felt for many weeks that he was drowning, thrashing in his sheets late into the darkest hours. He felt he was unable to see even arm’s length in front of him—as if he had plunged his head, and not his pen, into the inkwell that first night he set out to write the book of María’s life.

Those late nights he had been tilling his memory to unearth all the wonders La Ciega had planted there during their confessions and long yellow-grass walks. The night the Friar filled his twentieth page, he sat in his chair and stared at nothing in particular. The candle went out. But he stayed, staring straight into the darkness before him. It was that morning that he rolled up the manuscript and set out to see the Maestro.

With the book of the life of Madre Isabel de Jesús, María also seems inspired anew. The visions, the ecstasies have been pouring out. And all he had to do was to listen and to give them a bit of ink on which to land.

He sits, now, two nights after his visit to the Maestro, to record her day’s confession. His pen races against a dripping tallow candle. He breathes and tills his mind, listens for La Ciega’s familiar voice, for the words she spoke to him earlier that morning. He wanted the exact words; she always told stories better than he could.

*On one occasion, La Ciega went walking in a meadow—*

It was a florid meadow, she had told him, with the most extraordinary blossoms of every kind. He imagines it a field of feather grass and
goldenrod, overgrown with orchids the size of sunflowers, giant bluebells hanging like church bells from stem-green towers.

_In the middle of the florid meadow, she saw a tree and in this tree, there sat a little boy._

He was singing as if he were a little bird and his hand, he held a single rose.

“My boy,” she called up, “what are you doing up there?”

The boy looked down at her and answered,

“It has been two years now since I have died. And those two years I have sat up here, stuck in this tree, unable to go on to Heaven for no one has asked God to pardon me on my behalf and so I sit up here in this tree and wait.”

“O, you poor forsaken soul!” La Ciega cried out. “Will my pardon suffice?”

“Yes, yes it will!” replied the boy from his tree.

“O Almighty God!” La Ciega called to the heavens. “Almighty God, it is I, La Ciega, Your faithful servant. I beseech You that you please pardon this poor boy’s soul.”

La Ciega said one-thousand and one pardons for the boy’s soul and God heard her pardons and the boy flew up to heaven to unite with Him and the tree was empty in the sunlit field.

The Friar pauses a moment and reads over what he has written. The pen hangs heavy in his hand. Each wonder is vying to be written, to mix with the ink, to be born on the page, and live there forever.
ACT III.

Scene 16 – A Visit to Anita Bazan’s Father
The Pantoja-Bazan Household
Date: Unknown

María has spent more time at the Pantoja-Bazan household since her visitation from Anita’s mother. Anita feels compelled, by some unnamable force, to keep María close. She is surprised by how often she thinks of María. She twirls the curl at the back of her head, María, who hears my mother's voice, María, who walks between this world and the next, María, who needs a dinner and a warm bed in any case.

María had found Manuel’s father in Purgatory, suffering. She had visited him a few times there, heard his requests, and returned to the land of the living, where she had shared them with a teary-eyed Manuel over supper.

“He says that he is suffering in Purgatory for a debt he left unpaid in life—that you must send forty reales to make restitution. He requests that you send thirty reales to your poor cousin, the servant girl, and say one mass in the Vírgen de Sagrario. With this, he said to me, he will be free to finally leave Purgatory on the next festival day.”

Manuel found the words sticking to his tongue, “Are you certain that it is my father who left a debt unpaid, Ciega? It hardly seems his character—are you certain it was he?”

La Ciega had responded without missing a beat, “The very same. Mathias Pantoja. Doubt if you will, Señor, but know that I very seldom mistake a voice.” Manuel had turned to his wife and she had nodded affirmatively.
“Alright, then, so be it,” said Manuel. “Anita, give the forty reales to la Ciega in a skirt of French serge. Bring the thirty reales to my cousin—my father is right, she is poor and indebted and we must lend her our support. And let us sing the mass for my father so that he may finally rest in heaven.”

A few weeks later, Anita Bazan hears her familiar step: pit pat of feet, clunk of walking stick. María hasn’t been around much of late and Anita has tried to ignore her absence. Perhaps she’s been otherwise occupied. Perhaps she’s been in Purgatory all this time or in heaven to see my mother. Patience, patience, Anita had told herself, she’ll be back.

Pit pat clunk. La Ciega is back. Anita opens the door,

“Good day, María. How goes it? Do come in.” María crosses the threshold and comes inside.

“I have been on my feet many days now,” she says. “I am exhausted and half-starved. It has been many, many days now.” María is covered in dust, her black hair all matted.

Anita fetches María a plate of bread and some sardines and the two women sit.

María devours the food, and Anita waits. María pushes the plate away, leaving a small wedge of crust.

“On this past voyage of mine, Anita, I have seen your father.”

Anita Bazan smiles through hot, fat tears. “O María, how is he? What did he say? Is he well?”

María slumps in her chair and her head rolls back a bit.

“Day and night, night and day, Anita. The tar is the worst really, no the fiery pits, no it’s the pits and the tar together. The smell, Anita. It’s the burns, O, the smell of
burnt flesh, O the burning hair, the hair, the flesh, hair flesh…” María trails off as her chin dips to her chest.

Anita Bazan grabs her curl in one hand and reaches for María’s with the other,

“María dear? María, what is wrong, speak to me. María?” Anita runs to get a wet cloth. As Anita dabs María’s forehead, the streaks of water turn to mud as they course down her dusty face.

“Your father, is burning in Hell, Anita Bazan. He is burning in Hell. Burning, burning: his flesh, his hair—all burning in the fiery pits and tar. O the smell, Anita, it’s positively foul.”

Silence.

“The affair, Anita Bazan. Now do not pretend as if you are unawares. You know as well as anyone about the fair maiden. Your father is burning, burning in Hell for all eternity on account of the affair he had with th—”

“Out!” Anita growls. “Get out of my house and do not ever come back, you filthy, filthy liar!”

Scene 17 – Anita Bazan Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 10th, 1675

Anita Bazan is called to testify before the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Her voice is softer than she would like it to be:

“I recounted this most troubling encounter to Friar Montero and then I said to him, ‘Father, La Ciega has gone too far. Too, too far. Perhaps she has been possessed by
some sort of evil thing—a spirit of sorts? She had the nerve to come into my house and tell my husband that his father had died a debting man. Couldn’t be further from the truth, Friar, I assure you. And it was a mortifying prospect for Manuel. And Friar, I can hardly bring myself to tell you the most evil thing she said about my father.’ And he Friar responded to me with such calm in his voice,

‘Now, now, Anita, let us not be ungrateful. You and I have both known La Ciega for several years now. She is a poor and humble blind woman—kind and virtuous. And lest we forget all she has done to help you…’

‘Father, she is spreading the most wretched lies about my family. And to think I paid her good money, a skirt of French Serge. She is bad business, this woman, scandalizing the honest people of this village!’

The Friar squared his shoulders and leaned large over the table between us. His voice gruffer than before,

‘You watch yourself, Anita, insulting our sister as such. You listen closely now: she is, La Ciega, she is a saint.”’

Scene 18 – Friar Francisco Montero Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
August 18th, 1675

The very same day that María is arrested, Friar Montero is called before the court. A voice starts from the front of the room:

“Do you presume to know the cause for which you have been called?”
“The news has reached me that María Cotanilla, whom they call La Ciega (due to her appearance), has been imprisoned by the Inquisition. As I am her Confessor, it would seem necessary to question me, in order to acquire information for investigation of the cause for which she has been imprisoned.”

His eyes wander a moment to the notary whose supple wrist has been flicking a sizable feather this way and that. The Friar wonders what exactly the notary is putting down. The inquisitor continues questioning him, and the notary continues writing,

_Asked if he has written the life of the accused, said La Ciega, and if so, where and by whose hand,_

He said that he does have written, by his own hand, the life of La Ciega, that it consists of sixty-seven sheets and nineteen and one-half folios.

His mercy, the inquisitor, mandated that this witness, on penalty of th: (execution or excommunication), retrieve the document that very instant and surrender it. And so, the witness was accompanied to his house and was not let out of sight. He retrieved in one part, the first eighteen folios and in another, the remaining one and a half and swore in the sanctity of the Holy Spirit that he did not have others nor had he hidden any or given any to another person.

On his way back to the courtroom, manuscript rolled tight in his hand, the Friar thinks of the Maestro’s gift. He remembers presenting it to La Ciega, her ensuing glee and thanks. He remembers reading it out loud to her, thumbing through to find the start of the first chapter. He remembers, in particular, one page he had skipped over. He had glanced down and read it without fully realizing what it was:

_Proclamation of the Confessor of this Nun:_

_All that is said in this treatment, of favors and supernatural deeds, illustrations, visions, speeches, prophecies, gifts communicated by God, of the blessed Virgin, of the angels, saints, and of the sacred souls of Purgatory, and of this servant of God and all the marvels and divine blessing that, through her, it is understood that God has acted, does not attempt to cede the faith and authority that reigns and that should be maintained._
Friar Montero wonders about this confessor of Madre Isabel de Jesús. It’s possible he’s still alive today, somewhere near Ávila—an old man by this point. Unless the Inquisition came upon him, too. Or had this perambulatory disclaimer of offense against the Holy Office saved him? Friar Montero cannot help but feel like the confessor had written this opening statement, thirty years earlier, as a warning to future confessors, like himself.

*And what if I had written such a preamble? Might it have saved me from whatever is to come?*

*O, if only I had heeded your advice, my brother, my fellow wanderer in the unknowns of women’s minds.*

*My dear—If only I could remember this poor confessor’s name…*

Friar Montero, back in court, has collected himself. He says aloud, in the booming voice he saves for Sundays,

*“It is the role of a Confessor to believe the penitent.”*

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**Scene 19 – Quiteria Sanchez Testifies**

**The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo**

**June 28th, 1675**

“In the village of Colmenar de Oreja on this, the twenty-eighth day of the month of June of one-thousand, six-hundred and seventy-five years, his mercy, Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, Commissary of this Holy Office, mandated to appear before this courtroom, and myself, the present notary, Quiteria Sanchez, wife of Bernardo Mendietta, neighbor of this village.”

Today, perhaps for the first time in her life, Quiteria holds all the answers and none of the questions. She knows La Ciega best of anyone in the courtroom—all those
shared hours and chats and cups of wine are practically spilling out of her sleeves, like a magician’s scarves.

Quiteria has been so exhausted with herself, her constant wonder, her need to know. Ever since that day when she had asked La Ciega to find her first husband, Luís, she has been cursing her curiosity. It was thirteen years since her first husband’s death, but she had felt so close to him. And yet, since La Ciega had agreed to find him, felt closer to Luís and further from her current husband. Although Bernardo was alive and well and sleeping next to her each night, Quiteria could hardly look him in the eye. 

Curiosity sours, she thinks, rises to the surface in putrid curds of guilt.

It had been nearly impossible to resist the allure of La Ciega’s gift and María had been so encouraging of the whole endeavor. When Quiteria had asked her that day to locate Luís, María had so humbly and graciously obliged:

“For you, my dear friend, of course I will find him.” And she had—she found him in heaven, she said, princely his snow-white world.

After that, Quiteria’s curiosity renewed and poured out of her, like fresh milk from a pail. She asked after her two deceased sisters, then a brother-in-law. She felt her heart soar up to the heavens alongside La Ciega to meet them. It was only when she asked María to find her dearest brother, Augustín, that her misgivings resurfaced, heavier this time, harder, too. Lend your neighbor an egg or two, but never lend your heart, she had thought.

Quiteria sits on the wooden stool in the cool of relief, filled with answers in lieu of her usual burning desire to know. The silence around her is particularly gratifying and prompts Quiteria to speak even more quickly than usual:
“For many years now, I have known María Cotanilla, commonly called, La Ciega, by all of us villagers. I have known her since she was seven or eight years old. She would come to my house and tell me the most extraordinary things and I would always think to myself, *that girl has either a lot of God or a lot of the Devil in her*.”

Quiteria testifies for hours and hours that day, tells story after story after story about María. She tells the story of the screaming skull, the story of the bestial cousins and their beloved donkey, and the many stories of La Ciega leaving her body on earth to explore the beyonds. It is towards the start when Quiteria tells of La Ciega’s visit to her Augustín’s ghost. She begins,

“On one occasion, sitting with some sort of curiosity to know if my brother, who died without sacrament, was on the path to salvation, because in this life, I saw him be very mischievous on matters of women and, hearing what La Ciega had said to others about Hell and Purgatory, I said to her,

‘Come, La Ciega, will you not do me the mercy of knowing if Augustín Sanchez, my brother, is on the path to salvation?’ To which she responded,

‘I most certainly will; it would be my pleasure.’

“It wasn’t long before María returned to announce that she had found him. La Ciega’s fingernails were caked with dirt and a rather unpleasant smell hung about her and she had spoken slowly with an eerie sort of tone to her voice,

‘I was last night many hours in Purgatory. It was there that I found your brother lying flat on his back, stuck on a craggy stretch of ground, mouth up and open.’

La Ciega told me that she had asked Augustín if he needed help and that replied that he did.
She recounted me all that he had told her:

‘I have left certain obligations unsettled—obligations to a certain maiden I knew in my youth.’

“La Ciega could not, she said, disclose the name of this maiden; she said my brother had sworn her not to tell a soul. She told me that he owed this maiden a debt of 170 reales and that, having purged the rest of his sins, he was being detained for that reason only. For each real that went unpaid, La Ciega told me, my brother was to be detained in Purgatory for one year.

‘If you only knew, Señora, what I went through: all night long the soul of your brother did not leave me and me said to me, bow they have neglected me!’

Quiteria composes herself before the court, smooths her skirt over her knees and continues,

“Then night, La Ciega told me that, paying these 170 reales and saying a mass to Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, my brother Augustin would finally be freed to go meet God in heaven.

‘Ciega!’ I cried, ‘I do not have any more than one-hundred reales and the money for the alms or to finance the mass! O, what shall I do, Ciega?’

“And La Ciega comforted me,

‘Do not fret, Señora, I will find the seventy reales remaining—I will ask that someone lend them to us.’

“I was taken with her kindness and very grateful. I gave her the one-hundred reales and the alms for the mass and off she went with them.

“Soon after—only a few days had passed—La Ciega returned to my house. She said she had good news. The very day she had taken the money (and delivered it to the
maiden, I understood her to mean), the ghost of my brother had visited to tell her that he had risen to heaven. She told me he was filled with thanks and graces and the kindest words for my mother and I. It was a joyous moment and La Ciega and I celebrated it as such, but something did not sit well with me. I could not quite discern what felt so odd. And then it hit me: *The mass.* No one had said the requisite mass for my brother. So I asked La Ciega,

‘You did say that my brother could only get into heaven if we paid off the 170 reales and if we said the mass at Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, did you not? Ciega, I must say I am a bit confused: we paid the 170 reales, María, but I never said the mass. So, how was my brother permitted to rise up to heaven? Are you certain that you are not mistaken?’

‘It is rather odd, I suppose,’ La Ciega replied after a moment. ‘But it so happened that he was released only with the 170 reales. Or perhaps someone else said the mass on his behalf. Did you tell anyone else about the mass, Señora?’”

Quiteria throws her hands up and sends the gentleman of the courtroom a knowing look.

“*I, of course, had told a few people about this most unusual ordeal.*” By *a few,* of course, Quiteria meant *several.* She had told *several* people about the whole ordeal, couldn’t talk about anything else for a week. “So, I decided to go and verify if anyone else had said the required mass. I asked my mother if she had gone to say the mass for my brother. I asked my husband, Bernardo Mendietta (the soap seller). I asked my sisters, Luísa and Gerónima. I asked the wife of Augustín. And it was the most curious thing: *No one had said the required mass for Augustín.* And, furthermore, no one had the slightest idea who this maiden that La Ciega mentioned might have been. In perhaps a
lapse of my my better judgment, I even asked my brother’s wife if Augustin had ever mentioned a certain young maiden to which he was in some way obligated. Augustín’s wife responded that he most certainly had done no such thing.

“The next time I saw La Ciega I brought up this other curiosity. She had shrugged and replied flatly, as if only half-awake,

‘I cannot say.’

I asked her who the maiden was to whom my brother was obligated.

‘I cannot say,’ she said again.

I asked her who had lent her the 70 reales to complete the 100 I had given her. And she responded saying,

‘Señora, I am exhausted and I must say that I am rather displeased by all of these questions. Your brother is saved, reunited with God, and that is what matters. I brought him into heaven and ended his suffering as a favor that you had asked me. I ask nothing in return from you. Indeed, when he visited me he said to me:

‘Dear Ciega, your work has been most good. Tell my sisters that you will be generously repaid in Heaven, that I will commend you to God and they need not give you anything but thanks.’

‘So you see, Señora,’ La Ciega continued, ‘I did not tell you about this exchange with Augustín, because I did not care to discuss matters of payment; I had considered myself doing a favor for one whom I considered a friend. Now again, I will ask nothing in return from you, Quiteria, except a little thanks and peace. And no more questions, if you please!’”
This moment with La Ciega had stuck inside her, splintery, dry, impossible to swallow. She cursed her curiosity—she had pressed too hard, interrogated the only woman who had answers to these other-worldly matters. Had she wrongly accused a dear old friend? Or perhaps, Quiteria had wondered, perhaps La Ciega is upset because all my questions lead to one that she did not want to be asked.

“Sitting with some sort of mistrust, I suppose, mistrust and doubt of all that had happened, I began to wonder if perhaps,” Quiteria feels something rise up to the surface of her stomach, something else pushing against the dam of her throat. “I began to wonder if, after all those many years of friendship, could I have been deceived by La Ciega.”

Scene 20 – The Ragdoll
The Secret Prisons of the Inquisition
December 3rd, 1675

María is up late, replaying moments of her trial over and over again in her head, acutely aware of all she has said and not said. 

Little patches of my life, she thinks, that is all they have, all I have given them—little scraps from the makeshift fabric of my life. She wonders how the jury will stitch them together, imagines them holding up some ragdoll version of her. It is this gaudy ragdoll, not María, that the court will sentence. It will be María, however, whose will face the punishment.

Long before her arrest, María had sensed that even her closest friends were drifting from her. When she had lived her first office, laundress, by which the villagers of Colmenar had known her, she had been welcomed in their homes. She had been close to
people, trusted to handle their most intimate possessions. She had maintained and mended the very clothes that covered their backs. When she had knocked for alms, they had opened their doors to her, greeted her with a kiss, a bowl of leftover stew. But since she had been living out this second office in life, hearer of the unheard, messenger to the deceased, traveler to the unknown, her knuckles had lost their faculty. Doors no longer opened readily. She had to skirt certain houses on her alms begging route, never walked the path to the Pantoja-Bazan household anymore. Their door might as well be painted shut. And yet, it is her own door that troubles her most. Surely, she thinks, the Ruíz sisters will be called to testify. We have shared so much all these years. But now that I live here, alone, in this dark, square cell, away from our little home, what have we left to share?

In her cell, María can’t possibly know that Ana Ruíz had been summoned to testify exactly two months earlier. There, she can only wonder.

Scene 21 - Ana Ruíz Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 3rd, 1675

“I have kept María Cotanilla in my home, out of the charity of my heart, for twelve years now. Twelve years in August.”

There is so much Ana Ruíz could say. But since María’s arrest, she’s been avoiding certain doors in her mind. For, behind them, she’s stored reams and reams of memories of La Ciega—some light and gauzy, some heavy and abrasive, like burlap. And
now, called before the tribunal to testify, she’s forced back into these memories that
never cease to rub her raw.

 Ana’s exhausted. Taking care of La Ciega has meant so many sleepless nights. So
many sleepless nights. Now, trying to call her back, now shooing away the demons that
periodically possessed her. *All those voyages to the worlds beyond that she has boasted to Quiteria,
the Bazans, and the Friar*, Ana thinks to herself, *all those times she boasted to travel in spirit, she
left her body behind. And to whom? To me, her keeper—me and the demons.*

 In the absence of María and all her demons, the house is emptier, colder, quieter.
Now Ana can better care for her sister, Lucía—so sweet, so much more predictable, and,
being deaf and slow of speech, so much quieter than María. *Ay, María…where to begin?*

 The inquisitor begins, “I ask you if inside the house, was said La Ciega humble?
Was she inclined towards things of virtue and charity? And, if so, were such inclinations
clean of hypocrisy and vainglory and human ends?”

 Ana Ruiz blinks. *Where to begin?*

 The inquisitor looks at her expectantly, “It cannot be believed that in twelve
years you did not reach a familiarity to know such things. Twelve years, you said you
kept her in your house, no?”

 “Yes, twelve years I kept her in my house and it is my judgment of the accused
that, inside of the home, she was a friend of her own will. If there was something she did
not want to do, she would simply refuse to do it. If ever I asked Mariquita to do some
chore that displeased her, not only would she leave it undone, but she would become
wholly indignant. And I would have to scold her, *Mariquita, you have been very selfish.* I have
never seen her drink much wine, but she could drink plenty without being noticed and
she had a certain earthenware vessel at her disposal. But, I never saw her fallen or twisted.

“She is a friend of sorts, of going out. She would leave many mornings and returned late with the night. And two years ago now, she left for a whole fifteen days and, upon her return, I reprimanded her. She responded in outrage, ‘If you gave me what for to eat, I would not leave!’ I asked her where she had been and she said that she had been coming and going as such—today in such and such house, the morning in another, wherever they would give her what for to eat. And she told me, very pleased with herself, that all those other houses had given her plenty of succulent food. Such contempt.

“She is a friend of galas and of adorning herself, of ribbons in her hair, of cuffs on her wrist. Sometimes, I was embarrassed to go into public with her, because, alongside her, I looked her servant,” Ana looks down at her hands and lets a breathy half-laugh as she picks her palm. “I would warn her sometimes, ‘this dress you have put on is above your humble sphere.’ And she would respond all flustered, ‘It was a gift to me and it pleases them that I should wear it.’ And I came to understand eventually how she loves costumes, clothing of all kind. She is, after all, I realized, a laundress, spends all day caring for clothes of others far wealthier than she. I came to realize how I had humiliated her by reprimanding her.” Ana is surprised to hear her voice tangled up so in her throat. *I must not sound so sad,* she thinks. *And certainly, I mustn’t cry.*

“She is a friend of going to weddings and parties and of dancing at such events. And when I would reprimand her for some bad deed she had done, she would look at me and say, ‘O Ana, I did no such thing…’ by which she meant to say that the evil or unvirtuous deed was perpetrated by the spirits that she said to have inside of her. It was
the spirits, and not her, that danced and did the bad deeds, but, when she was virtuous, it was she herself that had done it.

“Yes, it is my judgment that said La Ciega is a liar; her virtue, feigned. Taking communion each day, a complete hypocrisy; the maltreatment by demons, a lie. And all of these lies,” Ana swallows hard, “all of these lies are so that the villagers should take her as virtuous, as a Saint. For although she most certainly is not a saint, in carrying this name, they will give her what for to eat and what for to wear. This is what all the villagers now feel—all the ration and prudent—that La Ciega walks around in a cloud of fraud!”

Ana is surprised by the echo of her own voice against the far panels of the room. She lowers her voice and sits up a little straighter. “It seems to methat this woman, María Cotanilla, has the ability to weave a lie better than any person I have ever met.”

The notary reads back her entire testimony verbatim for Ana’s ratification. Hearing her own words spoken back to her in another’s voice makes her keen to leave the courtroom. She quickly affirms and ratifies that her testimony was correctly recorded. She takes her time, however, writing her signature on the notary’s page. She prints her name with painstaking clarity, ensuring that all letters are exactly the same size. She is rather dismayed to see that the U comes out crooked.

Scene 22 – The Finishing Thread
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
December 4th, 1675

September is long, November a whole day longer. No one knows what these months have been like for María in the secret prisons—not Ana Ruíz, not Lucía Ruíz,
not Quiteria, not Friar Montero. No one knows if she has been tortured or not. No one quite knows how she has defended herself, if at all, if she has confessed.

“It might just be the best thing she can do for herself at this juncture—to confess I mean,” Luísa Sanchez says one day, hanging out some sheets to dry.

“I fear it might be the only thing,” Quiteria murmurs, as she watches the wind whip a ghostly sort of light into the grey-white linens.

On December 4th, María finally confesses:

“I would like to say before the courtroom the following: I, María Cotanilla, have invented everything,” she pauses for the courtroom’s reserved expressions of surprise, gasps stifled by masculine grunts.

“It is true—every day for three years, I went and confessed to the Friar some vision, some apparition or revelation, some coming and going from heaven or hell or purgatory, some favor of God and all of them, I say it now, every one of them, I invented. Every day for three years, I invented a new story, wove a new lie and every day, Friar Montero listened.

“I do not know if he knew that these were all fabrications or not. But I am sure of this: if he recognized that it was wrong to pretend as such, then why did he never reprimand me? Why did he never grab me by the wrist, yank me back and say, ‘What is all this madness?’ Why did he let me keep running with all these ideas run wild?

“If he were a good man, I ask you gentlemen of the court, why did he never press me on these matters? If Friar Montero were a good man, why did he never question me, like this Holy Office of the Inquisition has done in all these hearings, working tirelessly,
early in the mornings and late into the nights, to recognize the truth, to judge what is and isn’t true.”

It’s now late into the night and the court session comes to a close, the echo of these last words dangling in the courtroom like the finishing thread on a gown one simply cannot wait to wear.

Scene 23 – Her and the Book of Her Life
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
April 14th, 1676

And in the hearing of the fourteenth of April of one-thousand and six-hundred and seventy-six years, the said Inquisitor Paniagua gave to the said María Cotanilla a book, written by said Friar Francisco Montero, of the life of the accused.

María has accustomed to the scratching of the quill and wonders how many pages the notary has filled by this point.

The inquisitor gives the accused a notebook written in sixty-seven sheets and one-hundred and seventy-six that begins as follows—

Trusting that which the divine Majesty, by His grand mercy, has given me to be true…

And ending in the number one-hundred and seventy-six—

“It is true, as I have earlier confessed, that Friar Francisco Montero, my Confessor, had told me—now it would be nearly two and a half years ago—that he wanted to write my life and the favors that God had given me. And first, I must say, I
was rather taken aback, ‘Why ever would you want to write my life.’ But then I said, ‘Well, do it if it please you,’ but I never read what he wrote.”

No one asks her if she had ever heard her life read aloud. Perhaps the Friar had read her the first chapter. Whether for the first time or the hundredth, María hears the book of her life read aloud to her that day in court—the first line, the last line, and many others in between.

“I told him to burn it—” she blurts out. “There had been a rumor that they were coming for me, for the papers, the pages of the book of my life and so I told him to burn them.”

The inquisitor asks,

“What cause or motive did you have to tell said your Confessor that he should burns the papers of your life?”

“No other motive than the rumors that they were to accuse us before the Ecclesiastical Visitor,” she responds, impatiently.

“And for what would they have to accuse you and said your Confessor before the Visitor?” He looks down at her, from the corner of his eyes, speaks down from the corner of his mouth.

“Because I knew that everything that he had written in those pages were lies all spun and woven by me. And I was afraid, I suppose, that they would know and punish me.”

“And does it seem that perhaps your confessor knew that all he had written were fictions and lies woven—that the life he had written was false and feigned?”

“It seems to me that my Confessor did not know that they were fictions and lies of mine, what he had written—he had taken them as good. He was not afraid of being
accused, he told me. And when the Ecclesiastical Visitor came, he would not burn the book of my life—he took it as good.”

Scene 24 – Francisco Montero Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
November 6th, 1677

“I wrote said manuscript because I had heard rumors—many, many rumors in this town—that the Inquisition would call upon said María Cotanilla. And I knew that if the Sacred Tribunal were to call upon María Cotanilla, it would also call upon her confessor.” Friar Montero places a hand delicately on his breast. “And so, I recorded all she told me so that I would commit it to memory—the good and the bad—so that this Sacred Tribunal should see it all, so that they should get to the bottom of the whole situation and punish the wrongdoings that they uncovered. And I do not think that I have anything more to say on that.” He drops his head slightly. The inquisitor palms his cheek a moment and runs his fingers to his pear-like chin.

“Let it be said that it does not garner sympathy, this notion that you recorded what María Cotanilla told you for the benefit of this Sacred Tribunal. Rather, it might seem that the confessor of such a virtuous woman took great advantage of her spirituality. And it has arrived to the attention of the court the high esteem in which you held this book of her life—that you had declared, on at least one occasion that, ‘even being a poor Friar, I would not give this book up for a thousand ducats.”

The inquisitor paces a little. “And so, by reference of God, you are commanded to declare the intention with with you wrote all the evils that came from the mouth of
the said María Cotanilla and that you declare your belief and understanding of them. And you are commanded to declare it in truth!”

The Friar’s hand falls from his heart and into the folds of his robes.

“It was—I had given her human credit. Initially, when said María Cotanilla began to confess to me, it seemed so good what she told me—so good. To be clear, I never considered or deemed her saintly; but virtuous, yes. I thought her virtuous and I gave her simple human credit.”

The inquisitor begins to pace again, “What exactly does one mean to say by ‘human credit’?”

“By human credit I mean that I believed it possible that all María Cotanilla told me could have been. It could have been that God had manifested, it could have been good and not against the faith. Yet, I was never certain that she was not deceiving me. And so I thought it wise to record all that she told me, either way. These, I declare, were my motives. It was over time that I came to realize and believe that God would not manifest before said María Cotanilla, that it would certainly be against the faith and thus could not be. And, over time, I realized that many of her propositions were against the faith and thus could not be—that the children of Purgatory could only go to heaven after Judgment Day, for example, could not be.” Montero’s hand migrates back to his heart. “Man can err and if this man has erred, it has not been with bad intentions.”
Another villager comes in to testify on July the tenth, 1675. He is a distant in-law of Friar Montero.

“I know La Ciega goes each day to confess and take communion, and yet all this of the miracles, I take for fraud.”

“One evening I was in the home of my in-law, Francisco Montero, the Augustinian Friar, Confessor of the accused María Cotanilla. We had dined, plates and glasses empty, stomachs full.

He told me that he was writing the book of her life. He got up from the table, and from his desk drawer, retrieved a notebook, which at that point, seemed to have six or eight folios—many pages bound together. Before showing it to me, he had me promise to hold in secrecy all that I was to read. And so, I read a few pages of the life of La Ciega, as she is vulgarly called. Nothing that I read recalled remotely anything I had previously known about her life. I reprehended the Friar for this endeavor:

‘Couldn’t this lead to something bad—deeply and gravely bad?’ I asked him.

He responded, ‘I, in the role of Confessor, have to believe the penitent and, in this way, by this road, no harm can come.’

And then, then I suppose, if I recall correctly, he laughed. I mean, it was rather late and we had eaten and drunk. But if I am not incorrect, then I suppose the Friar laughed. And with this, I took all the he had told me as false. I took it to mean that he knew what he had done and, following, that all the purported virtues of La Ciega were false. How else can one understand a laugh as such?
In the village of Madrid, this twelfth day of the month of August of one-thousand and six-hundred and seventy-six years, the gentlemen of the Council of Holy Inquisition, having seen through the process brought before the Inquisition of Toledo against María Cotanilla, La Ciega, neighbor and native of the village of Colmenar de Oreja. They have determined that this accused, in a public Auto de Fe, wearing the insignias of fraud, that she should be read her sentence and that she should be gravely reprehended, advertised, admonished and that the following day she shall be given one-hundred lashes in the public streets and that she should be banished from Madrid, Toledo, Colmenar de Oreja and an eight-league radius surrounding for a period of four years. This she should complete with the end of settling in a place that seems more appropriate so that she should be able to sustain herself begging alms and where there should be a commissioner and notary of the Holy Office before which she should have the obligation to present herself each month and the inquisitors will advertise to said ministries the crimes of this accused so that they proceed with care and that they are made aware of this.

Scene 27 – All She Has
The Secret Prison of the Inquisition
September 22nd, 1676

María is called for her Auto de Fe on the 20th of September, 1676. It is on this day they read her the aforementioned sentence. So, it was the 21st of September, 1676 when she received her hundred lashes in the public square. They must have left her limp
and striped with red, but nothing like a ragdoll. A ragdoll wouldn’t bleed hot blood or weep hot tears.

María is not banished immediately. She is kept in the secret prisons of the Inquisition. The Friar’s case has been reopened. And so, while the Inquisition has banished her eight leagues away, they hold her there, right in the middle of Colmenar for at least a few more months.

We leave her here, on Tuesday, September 22nd, 1676, with the few things she possesses:

She has her cell, square, dark, and to herself.

She has her duty now, the lead witness in the Friar’s case.

She has behind her, all of her visions—

The first time she went to the seashore, carried by angels over the salty spray.

The glowing skirts of the Virgin in which she hid as a small orphan girl.

The tumbling golden letters on the glass panes of heaven.

And before her, she has the secrets of all that is to come.
Primary Source Citations

A citation in this section indicates that the passage of narrative is sourced from the primary documents in either the trial of María Cotanilla or the trial of Francisco Montero.

[Q] following a citation indicates that anything in the indicated excerpt that falls between quotation marks is directly translated dialogue and anything indented, 1.5 line-spaced, and in italics is documentary text translated directly from the original Spanish into English.

[Q] centered under a scene’s title indicates that the scene is sourced from one testimony or document and that anything between quotation marks is directly translated dialogue and anything indented, 1.5 line-spaced, and in italics is directly translated documentary text.

A document cited without an excerpt listed above it means that it was the constitutive source for the scene even though it may not translate any dialogue or text directly.

Abbreviations

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<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>AHN</td>
<td>Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid</td>
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Note:
María Cotanilla’s file is leg. 114, exp. 4.
Francisco Montero’s file is leg. 114, exp. 12.
Act. I

Scene 1 – Her Arrest
The Home of Augustin Serrano
August 18th, 1675

Report on the Arrest of María Cotanilla from Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
AHN, Inq., August 25, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f.

“We meet her…washing-tubs for laundry”
Maria Cotanilla’s 1st Hearing
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 164v-165r

“Burn the book…lost are we” [Q]
Testimony of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inquisition, December 23, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 19

Scene 2 – Her Assets
From the Desk of Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
August 27th, 1675

“I went to…might be for naught” [Q]
Inventory Report by Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
AHN, Inq., August 25, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f

“The town crier …before the auction”
Report by Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, Commissary
AHN, Inq., leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 8r

“Maria Garcia buys… broom for eight”
Auction ledger
AHN, Inq., leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 8v-9v

Scene 3 – First Hearing of the Accused
Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 27th, 1675

First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 162r-165v

“In the Holy…all that comes” [Q]
Ibid., f. 162r
“Would the accused...office in life” [Q]
Ibid., f. 162r

Genealogy
“The inquisitor asks...the invitations inside”
Ibid., 162-163
Father - 162
Mother - 162 v
Stepmother – 163v

Blindness
Ibid., 163v

Discourse of her life
Ibid., 163v-164r
Homelessness and residence with Ruiz sisters – 164r

Scene 4 – Do you suppose, presume, or know?
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 27th, 1675 – October 2nd, 1675 – October 3rd, 1675 – October 8th, 1675

First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 162r-165v

“Do you suppose...you are here?” [Q]
Ibid., 164

“I am not...a humble sinner” [Q]
Ibid., f. 165

“Let it be said...feels herself guilty” [Q]
Ibid., 165

“She said she...Don Garcia Paniagua” [Q]
Ibid., 165v

Second hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., October 2, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 165v-170r

“I run all...before the tribunal” [Q]
Ibid., 166r

“Let it...tell the truth” [Q]
Ibid.
Third hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., October 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 170v-172r

Additional hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., October 8, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 172v

“It is asked…tell the truth” [Q]
Ibid.

“I have requested…serve me justice” [Q]
Ibid.

“What does that…Don García Paniagua” [Q]
Ibid.

Ink blot halfway down page
Ibid.

Scene 6 – The Rational and Prudent Persons of Colmenar
From the desk of the Notary, Gabriel Robreño
July 16th, 1675

“Regarding the question…Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero” [Q]
Report by Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
AHN, Inq., July 16, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f.

Witness Roster
Witnesses deposing against María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f.

Scene 7 – The Eve of Quiteria Sanchez’s Testimony
The Mendietta-Sanchez household
June 27th, 1675

First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 21v

“Here, a memory… a whole week”
Ibid., 29r

“That night, I…a whole week” [Q]
Ibid.

“That girl either…devil in her” [Q]
Ibid., 32

ACT II.

Scene 8 – A New Confessor, A Brink
The Parish Church
March 14th, 1673

“he is nearly…town of Chinchón”
First hearing of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., September 1, 1677, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 17v

Until recently, she…confessed to Friar Maroto”
Ibid.

“He had been…her ever since”
Ibid., f. 18r

“She first confesses…March 14th, 1673”
Second testimony of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., September 2, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 57v

“María goes to…Friar every day”
Testimony of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., April 11, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 13v-14r

Scene 9 – A Visit from the Mother of Anita Bazan
The Pantoja-Bazan household, on the edge of town
March, 1674

First testimony of Ana Bazan
AHN, Inq., September 10, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 66r-68v

Scene 10 – Word Travels
The Grocery, the Bakery, and the Mendietta-Sanchez household
March, 1674

“She told me… this over dinner”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
“angels came into…one even noticed”
Ibid., f. 26

“The saints have… the Virgin, too”
Third testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 43

“O, Heaven is … air, arms outstretched”
First testimony of Luisa Sanchez
AHN, Inq., July 8, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 35v

“But would you…me, dear friend?
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 328v

Scene 12 – The Friar Makes a Call
The Village of Chinchón
October 12th, 1673

Hearing of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., November 6, 1677, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 104

Scene 13 - The Maestro’s Gift
The Meadows, The Ruiz household
The next day - October 13th, 1673

“He has brought… they part ways”
Hearing of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., November 6, 1677, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 104

“One day the… do us good…” [Q]
This excerpt quotes directly Electa Arenal’s translation of a passage by Isabel de Jesús, cited below:
Isabel de Jesús, "Vida De La Venerable Madre Isabel De Jesús, Recoleta Augustina En El Convento De San Juan Bautista De La
Scene 14 – The Book of Her Life
The Desk of Friar Montero
October 14th, 1673

"Yesterday, she was… the sunlit field"
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 25

ACT III.

Scene 16 – A Visit to Anita Bazan’s Father
The Pantoja-Bazan Household
Date: Unknown

"María had found…rest in heaven.”
First testimony of Ana Bazan
AHN, Inq., September 10, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 66v

“I have been… filthy, filthy liar!”
Ibid., f. 67

“It’s the tenth… is a saint.”
Ibid., f. 67v

"is a saint” [Q]
Ibid.

Scene 18 – Friar Francisco Montero Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
August 18th, 1675

“The very same… to another person” [Q]
First testimony of Friar Montero
Proclamation of the … should be maintained [Q]

Isabel de Jesús, "Vida De La Venerable Madre Isabel De Jesús," 1.

I’ve excerpted this passage from the preamble to the book of Isabel de Jesús’s life, written by her confessor, Francisco Sanz Gabriel de Leon. The translation my own.

“It is … believe the penitent”[Q]

First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez

AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 24r

Scene 19 – Quiteria Sanchez Testifies

The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
June 28th, 1675

“In the village…of this village” [Q]

First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez

AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 21v

“She asked … then a brother-in-law”

Ibid., f. 28v

“that girl has…Devil in her”

Ibid., f. 32r

“Quiteria testifies for … her Augustín’s ghost”

Ibid., f. 21v-32v

“She told me … for one year” [Q]

Ibid., f. 23

‘If you only … have neglected me!’ [Q]

Ibid., f. 23v

“Sitting with some…by La Ciega”

Ibid., f. 24v

Scene 20 – The Ragdoll

The Secret Prisons of the Inquisition

68
December 3rd, 1675

“But since she…Pantoja-Bazan household anymore”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 22

Scene 21 - Ana Ruiz Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 3rd, 1675

First testimony of Ana Ruíz
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r-65r

“She prints her…comes out crooked.”
First testimony of Ana Ruíz
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 65r

Scene 22 – The Finishing Thread
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
December 4th, 1675

“It is true… Friar Montero listened”
Hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., December 11, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 14r

“I do not…ideas run wild?” [Q]
Ibid., 21r

“If Friar Montero… all these hearings” [Q]
Ibid.

Scene 23 – Her and the Book of Her Life
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
April 14th, 1676

“And in the...what he wrote” [Q]
Hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., April 14, 1676, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 20r

“There had been...it as good” [Q]
Hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., December 23, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 19

Scene 24 – Francisco Montero Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
November 6th, 1677

[Hearing of Friar Montero]
AHN, Inq., November 6, 1677, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 86r-90r

Scene 25 – The Laugh
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
July 10th, 1675

“I know La Ciega...take for fraud” [Q]
First testimony of Sebastian Nevarro
AHN, Inq., July 10, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 39v

“One evening I...I asked him”
Ibid.

“I, in the...correctly, he laughed” [Q]
Ibid.

Scene 26 – The Sentence
From the Gentlemen of the Council of the Inquisition
August 12th, 1676

[Hearing of the Council’s Sentence for María Cotanilla]
AHN, Inq., August 12, 1676, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f.
Scene 27 – All She Has
The Secret Prison of the Inquisition
September 22nd 1676

“Auto de Fe… 20th of September, 1676”
AHN, Inq., September 20, 1676, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f.

“The first time… the salty spray”
Third testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., August 12, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 42v.

“The glowing skirts… small orphan girl”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 29

“The tumbling golden… panes of heaven”
First testimony of Luisa Sanchez
AHN, Inq., July 8, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 35v
Chapter 2.
Envisioning Blindness

Scene 1 – Visions of Vision
The bedroom of María Cotanilla
Date: Unknown

It doesn’t begin with darkness. The darkness sets in when she turns five—just around the time her mother dies. Perhaps it fell over her eyes slowly, a greyish dusk that never dawned. Or, maybe it seeped in slowly and black, like a blot of ink through paper. It could have burst in like a great flood and washed away all the pieces of what came before. In any case, when María Cotanilla was five years old, she lost her mother, and almost lost her sight, forever. María would one day see again, but she would also remain forever a blind woman.

“Don’t call me ‘Sister,’” she said once to her confessor. “Call me ‘La Ciega,’ or perhaps my name.” She was, to everyone in Colmenar de Oreja, La Ciega, the Blind Woman. She was more La Ciega than María Cotanilla. That was how Colmenar de Oreja knew her and that is how María knew Colmenar de Oreja.

They knew her tapping her toe in front of her to find the loose cobblestone that, for her, marked one meter to the Plaza Nueva. They knew her tilting an ear towards a faraway voice to identify its owner, towards the valley to hear the evening crickets singing sundown.
They knew her knocking on their doors to beg alms, never forgetting whose house came after whose as she worked her way down the hill. They knew her running her hands over wet linens as she washed them, searching for spots and stains. They knew her plucking the thread on her spindle, tightening it ever so slightly so that it was perfectly taut. It almost looked as if she were tuning a harp whose music only she could hear.

No one knew if she lit a lamp when she was the only person in a room. When she was alone, did she live in total darkness? Did she keep a lamp lit out of habit or in hopes that she might one day see again by its light?

No one knows if she had lit a lamp the night she saw again. She was winding bobbins in her bedroom, one hand running rhythmic circles around the other, which hung still as stone. The church bells rang and she knelt for evening prayers. She had been thinking of spools and strings and strands, but in that moment, she lost herself contemplating the Trinity.

*Cantas con voz sonora,* the bells sang.

*La gloria de Dios Potente*

*Tu llamas a toda gente*

*Al que muere y al que llora...*

Tears gathered in the inner corners of her eyes. And when they brimmed over and spilled down her cheeks, they seemed to take her blindness with them. It was as if they washed away layers and layers of mud that had caked over her eyes for all those years. The more she saw, the more she cried. The more she cried, the more she saw. Until at last she blinked and found herself staring straight into the eyes of Jesus. She saw, right there in front of her, an image of Jesus, a portrait she could not possibly have
painted with her mind’s feeble eye. She let herself sink into his gaze—the first gaze she had shared in over twenty years.

She felt it envelop her. She knew so well the feeling of a piercing stare that stung the back of her neck, but she had never felt a gaze like this—one that cupped her skin, like skin. His eyes never strayed from hers, yet his pupils seemed to illuminate the contours of her body and, though her eyes never left his, she saw herself alight. How she lit up to share a gaze, to see herself be seen, to watch herself be watched.

Although she could see it all, right in front of her, she couldn’t help but doubt. It was all so beautiful and true and divine she thought, that it could only be a cruel temptation from the devil. And yet, she did not blink, even as the light began to sear her pupils. She held Christ’s gaze with all her might, for it was all she had.

She held it so hard that she broke it, shattering the vision of Christ’s gaze into a million pieces. Darkness gushed forth through from behind his eyes, a river of black bile. A terrible wind came down from overhead, a batting of wings, hundreds, maybe thousands of birds were gathering, circling, hungry. She watched as a flood of ravens and rooks rushed in and one by one snatched the shards of his image in their talons. As they flew away, they glinted obsidian and taunted her with one last flash of light.

“And then I was left in a deep darkness once again.” That’s how the story ended every time she told it. She was always left La Ciega.

***
María’s blindness comes up in every testimony of the trial, on almost every page, practically every time she is mentioned. We see her conjured before us in many different stories, accused on so many counts by many different voices that each call her by her name of choice, La Ciega. There are a few puzzling aspects about María’s blindness in the trial that we will explore in this chapter. The first: although the villagers so ubiquitously referenced her blindness, they seemed to know almost nothing about the nature of his disability. We know from her first hearing that she was blinded at age five, but we don’t know why, how, or to what degree. María never divulged much about the circumstances surrounding her vision loss, only that it coincided with her mother’s death.

It’s hard to know how much weight to give this piece of information. It could be that María’s fifth year happened to be a particularly ruthless one. But it could be that these hardships were linked. Perhaps María and her mother were in some terrible accident or contracted some horrific fever that killed her mother and left her sightless. Maybe María suffered from a congenital disease that caused her to lose her sight. It is possible that María’s blindness was advanced by the trauma of losing her mother or that her blindness was a psychosomatic response to such a traumatic experience.

Ophthalmologists report that “hysterical blindness” is a fairly common occurrence—that patients, especially girls between the ages of eight and thirteen, often process abuse or trauma (they mention deaths in the family in particular) psychosomatically, experiencing a “functional vision loss” without any detectable ocular damage. We can’t know what

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1 First hearing of María Cotanilla  
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 163v

exactly María saw—if it was that grayish dusk or that inky blot, or whether she would have noticed a lamp lit in a room. We will see this uncertainty frustrate her neighbors; we will see them try to discern how blind she actually is and, ultimately, accuse her of faking her disability altogether.

This is all we can know with certainty: María Cotanilla lived as a blind person for twenty-five years of her life. So in our effort to understand María’s possible embodiments of blindness, we will begin by studying what it meant to live as La Ciega, the blind woman, in a small, seventeenth-century Spanish village.

Just as the trial gives us very little information about the cause of María’s blindness, it offers very little about how it played into her daily life. I tried imagining her feeling her way through the uneven streets of Colmenar. I wondered, *did she have help? Did she rely on a perfect memory of her hometown’s every twist and turn?* I scoured the trial for clues about the logistics of her mobility, but I found nothing.

After surveying the historiography of disability studies, it became clear that this trial is not unusual in its scant documentation of the material realities of blindness. Katherine Ott helps us situate these holes in the history of disability—how they came to pock the historiographical landscape and how we might begin to fill them. She writes,

> For historians, the most difficult modalities of peoples’ lives to retrieve from the past is how bodies move…Historical documentation of people in motion, especially bodies that move in unconventional ways has existed only since the advent of cinema. Objects can help restore that lost knowledge. The heft of a prosthetic limb, the rigidity of a brace, the absence of padding on wheels, the size

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and shape of an ear trumpet, a boot with four-inch soles, lenses tinted green or rose—these objects document movement.³

The trial does not proffer much information about how María moved through the world. In the whole transcript, I found one clue: Ana Ruíz mentioned once, in passing, that María had a guide stick. Ana testified that, in her doubts of María’s blindness, she had tried to discern “if [María] saw or if got around by the guide stick.”⁴ From this statement, it seems that María did carry a guide stick when she walked, but that it was unclear how much she relied upon it for guidance. Aside from this, we find little trace of any objects that document María’s movement. Neither could I find any historical studies devoted to material culture of blindness. However, I suggest that we can direct our study to visual and literary artworks from the period to give us a sense of the sorts of assistive objects and technologies that might have been available to a blind person in 1675.

Simone Chess looks to cheap print ballads as “some of the most explicit sources for an investigation into the material realities of early modern blindness and the public reception of assistive technologies.”⁵ More specifically, Chess elaborates, the woodcut illustrations that accompany the ballad texts, “fill in missing information about adaptive tools for the blind while simultaneously providing the reader with an uninterrupted look—an opportunity to stare—at a blind person in action.”⁶ Chess begins with “The

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⁴ First Testimony of Ana Ruíz [Q] AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r
In contemporary Spanish, the word “bastón blanco” is more commonly used for “white cane.” Ana Ruíz used the word, “tiento,” for which the Real Academia Española defines in its second definition as, “Palo que usan los ciegos para que les sirva de guía,” (stick used by the blind to serve as a guide).
⁵ Simone Chess, "Performing Blindness: Representing Disability in Early Modern Popular Performance and Print," In Recovering Disability in Early Modern England, compiled by David Houston Wood and Allison P. Hobgood (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2013), 114.
⁶ Ibid., 114
rarest Balled that was ever seen, / Of the blind beggar’s Daughter of Bednal-Green” whose illustrator etched for us an image of a blind beggar sporting, Chess writes, “the most complete suite of adaptive technologies” she had found to date. When we stare at this blind beggar in action, we see the following: a long staff, bell or collection tin on a string around his neck, and a jaunty canine, leashed with a spotted collar, to lead the way.

Joaquín Álvarez Barrientos offers us a similar summation of the blind as portrayed specifically in Spanish art and literature. “The figure of the blind person is familiar to everyone,” he writes. “We are accustomed to finding it picaresque novels, in classical works of our literature, in comedies, interludes, stories, etc, and s/he has been a character represented in paintings, etchings, and films. Literature presents them to us accompanied by a guide, by a guitar or hurdy-gurdy, with a satchel where they carry their merchandise, and a cane on which they support themselves.”

We have no image of María Cotanilla to stare at—no courtroom sketch and certainly no filmic capturing of her in motion. We can, however, direct our study to visual renderings of blind people in art to help us picture what blindness her might have looked like.

“Mendigo ciego y un muchacho” or as it is titled in English, “A Man Leading a Blind Friar,” (Fig. 1). brings us pretty close to María: somewhere in the seventeenth-century and 348km from Colmenar de Oreja in Valencia. Ribera pens

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7 Ibid., 114
the apparently blind friar holding a long staff in his hand and being led by a companion or guide.

There is no mention of any guide in the trial’s several hundred folios. While this does not rule out the possibility, it does seem unlikely. Moshe Barasch observes that in the Middle Ages, the blind-guide relationship became a focal point of many works of art. There developed, he writes, “a lively, sometimes even dramatic interaction between them.” Indeed, the sixteenth-century hailed a pinnacle of Spanish picaresque, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, a novel that centers around, and is even narrated by, a boy who works as a guide for an old blind man. This work and its protagonist so vibrantly colored the character of the guide, that to this day, the Spanish word for a person or animal that guides the blind is *lazarillo.*

It is possible that María had a guide that no one thought worth mentioning in court. But, picaresque characters aside, it is hard for me to imagine that María could spend so much time with another person without generating a swath of noteworthy anecdotes. Ana Ruíz, María’s landlady, seems the closest figure to a

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caretaker in María’s life and later, in the third chapter, we will take a look at the dramas that rose off of their intimate relationship. Further, it does seem that, if there had been a guide, the inquisitor would likely have summoned to testify someone with such proximity to María.

It is possible that María Cotanilla had a seeing-eye dog, which are commonly depicted next to images of blind men (see Figs. 4-6 below). I could not find any pictorial representations of blind women walking alone with a seeing-eye dog, but that is not to say that it never happened. William Hanks Levy, nineteenth-century typhlologist claims that a woman in rural Germany was led by a seeing-eye gander, who walked her to her church pew every morning.\(^\text{12}\) However, this was the only alleged *lazarillo* of the goose variety of which I heard tell (unfortunately there is no image of this accompanying Levy’s text). Images like like Jacques Callot’s print, “L’aveugle et son chien,” (Fig. 2) and show a dignified and functional blind man-canine relationship (see Fig. 3).

However, much of the art and literature from the period renders blind people farcically. It is important to bear in mind that cultural renderings often set out to caricature their disability or invoke it metaphorically; they do not always intend to document the reality of blind experiences.

These renderings often invoked blindness to illustrate the biblical the parable of the blind: “And he spake a parable unto them, Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?”\(^\text{13}\) Perhaps the most famous of these

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\(^{13}\) Luke 6:39, KVJ
works is Pieter Bruegel I’s 1568, *Parable of the Blind* (Fig. 4) and below, Pieter van der Heyden’s, *Parabel van de twee blinden*, (Fig. 5).

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**Fig. 2.** Jacques Callot, *L’aveugle et son chien*. Circa 1622. Pencil, 136 x 87 mm. Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. From: The Auckland Art Gallery, http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/explore-

**Fig. 3.** Anonymous Ferrarese Engravers, *Blind Beggar with a Dog*. Late 15th century, Engraving plate mark, 225 x 110mm. The Illustrated Bartsch Collection. Available from: ARTstor.

In the etching shown below, Jacques-Antony Chovin depicts a blind man led by his guide dog right into the arms of a mustachioed Death. With one hand, Death yanks the blind man’s staff away from him; in the other, he holds scissors to the dog’s leash, as if to suggest that, stripped of these aids, the blind man will at last be his.

Death’s dapper feathered hat and goatee gloss the image with a thin veneer of humor but the grim message cuts sharply through: left to their own devices, the blind are utterly helpless, hopeless, and incapable of survival.

That these images depict autonomy of the blind as ill-fated folly should not occlude the fact that the blind community of Spain was remarkably well-organized in the orchestration of mutual aid. On an informal level, blind storytellers would teach each other ballads and poems to recite.14 Parents of blind children would even entrust them as a sort of apprentice to an older blind mentor.15

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14 Barrientos, “Literatura Y Economía,” 317
This tradition of the blind helping the blind was even institutionalized in Spanish cofradías (confraternities) and hermandades (brother- or sisterhoods), which operated as something between a mutual aid society and a guild. Rumeu de Armas, in his study of social assistance in Spanish history, lists the Hermandad for the blind right alongside that of the tailors’, shoemakers’, comics’, black people’s hermandades. Madrid’s Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de la Visitación, formed around 1614.\(^\text{16}\)

These cofradías and hermandades at once served as powerful lobbies for interests of the visually-impaired and as cultivators of support system within the blind community. They fought to secure monopolies on certain industries, namely selling cheap print ballads and busking, even the right to panhandle,\(^\text{17}\) for its members.\(^\text{18}\) They also coordinated social programs, like health insurance and burial services for its members.\(^\text{19}\) These organizations cultivated mutual support between blind people. If a member of Valencia’s outfit was short a guide, their dearest companion affiliate was required to share their guide with them for at least fifteen days.\(^\text{20}\)

It is pretty unlikely that María was a member of the Hermandad. By the time of the trial, María had only made it to the capital once in her whole lifetime.\(^\text{21}\) So it is possible that she was not even aware that the Hermandad existed. What’s more, the barrier for entry was sizeable: two-hundred reales up front in addition to twenty-four in annual dues.\(^\text{22}\) In fact, members of the Hermandad were deemed “aristocrats of the poor”

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\(^\text{17}\) We will discuss blind beggars in greater depth in Chapter 2, Scene 3.
\(^\text{18}\) Rumeu de Armas, *Historia de la previsión social*, 269-72.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 135
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{21}\) First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
   AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 31v
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid., 272
and looked down upon the blind non-members as mendicants.\textsuperscript{23} It is not probable that María, in her persistent financial duress, was included in this upper-crust of the blind social sphere.

This is not to say that María had no community or support. From her neighbors’ testimonies, it is apparent that María had a very involved support network. The villagers of Colmenar housed, fed, and employed María. They even invited her to social functions, like weddings. None of these neighborly caretakers ever mentions helping María with anything specifically related to her blindness: no linking elbows to lead her home or accompanying her to the market. If they were doing this sort of work for María, they almost certainly would have mentioned it in court. María’s neighbors speak very candidly in court of their feelings of resentment towards her, making it clear how much they gave her and how little they felt her appreciation.

So, are we then to imagine María making her way through life, a blind woman on her own?\textsuperscript{24} This image of a blind person navigating successfully while alone is quite rare. Yet, Levy writes to the contrary: “…the phenomenon of the blind walking alone in the streets was by no means uncommon 250 years ago.”\textsuperscript{24} Levy does not extend this same confidence to his discussion of the “Peculiar Position of Blind Women.” Rather, he laments the misery of blind women who must make their way through the world alone. He writes, “the prayer of many and many a poor blind creature has nightly been that she might not live till the morning.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Barrientos, “Literatura Y Economía,” 319.
\textsuperscript{24} Levy, Blindness and the Blind, 68
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 373

As the text was published in 1872, Levy dates this phenomenon back to around 1662.
There are remarkably few depictions of blind women in European art. The ones we do have, are mostly portrayed in a stationary position, so we do not get to see them in motion. So, we have very few visuals to help us imagine a young, single, blind woman navigating her seventeenth-century world entirely on her own.

Various testimonies in the trial paint a vague image for us of María in action, competent and hard at work. In the very beginning of her first testimony, María said that “she sustains herself by her work, that she is hired to wash, wind, and spin.”\(^26\) In the episode recounted above, María testifies that she was working in her bedroom by herself, winding bobbins.\(^27\) While to me, this seems like a very difficult work to do without one’s sense of sight, Levy asserts confidently that blind women performed this sort of work quite aptly: “The employment of knitting is perhaps the most widely diffused and the oldest of those carried on by the blind.”\(^28\) Blind women, he notes, are also “equal if not superior to their sighted neighbors” in domestic tasks, like the washing and cleaning by which María earned her living. Pitying of blind women though he is, Levy lauds the blind in general as capable of any kind of work. He even encourages their use of the circular saw machine, although he warns that it does demand “the exercise of some judgment on the part of the man so engaged.”\(^29\)

As it was invented in the late eighteenth-century, we know that María Cotanilla, La Ciega, never operated a circular saw. Aside from that, we can’t know the limits or

\(^{26}\) First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 162r
\(^{27}\) Ibid., f. 168v
\(^{28}\) Levy, *Blindness and the Blind*, 358. Levy asserts that knitting had been a popular occupation for blind women since the 1550’s.
\(^{29}\) Levy, *Blindness and the Blind*, 364
triumphs of her embodied blindness. In many ways, María seems to embody the possibility of success when a blind woman leads herself—she seems resilient, comfortable, and independent in her blindness. Yet the brief, ecstatic encounter with vision retold in the scene above seems to reveal a burning desire for sight. We see this sentiment reflected also when María tells Quiteria she always prayed that she would one day be able to read and, that God had answered her and gave her the ability to read in Heaven.\textsuperscript{30} As she concludes her retelling of this vision of seeing Christ’s portrait, she gives us perhaps our clearest window into her embodiment of blindness: “And then I was left in a deep darkness once again.”\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{30} First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 35v
\textsuperscript{31} First hearing of María Cotanilla [Q]
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 168v
Luísa Sanchez has always had been curious. Since that day at her sister’s house when María had described to them what heaven looked like in such detail, Luísa’s curiosity had turned to cold, hard suspicion. It was only when she’d pressed the matter that María explained that God had answered her prayers for sight, but only when she was in Heaven.

In the court chambers, Luísa hopes that her stubborn suspicions will finally be put to use, perhaps even appreciated. She’s worn her yellow dress and speaks with confidence, eager to demonstrate her capacity for thorough observation. She says,

“Her feet hardly touched the floor. It was as if she flew to him—or at least it looked that way from where I was sitting. Something, it seemed, was pulling her across the cold church floor to the pulpit. Her left breast led, her right breast, her arms and legs followed, and her head came last, as if almost left behind.

“Everyone thought she was being carried by angels. They thought they were witnessing a miracle. They thought they were watching angels reach down from heaven, into our church, into the breast of La Ciega.

“Perhaps I would have thought the same. But I had seen something that no one else saw. While the congregation was deep in prayer, my eyes happened to be wandering, to the altar, to the heads bobbing in the pews in front of me. And in the instant before La Ciega flew across the church, I saw a movement out of the corner of my left eye. It came from the left side of the pulpit. It came, I’m almost certain, from Friar Montero. Hand held low, somewhere near his knees, he moved his fingers towards his palm as if
he were beckoning to her. No one else noticed this, but in the moment right before María flew, Friar Montero beckoned to her as if to say, ‘Come now, fly to me.’”


The Beckon scene is one of María’s most public ecstatic experiences recounted in the trial. Most of the mystical moments in the trial are the villagers’ retellings of María’s retellings, but that day Luísa and all the other church-goers witnessed María’s ecstatic pull across the church. Sitting there, they had to try to make sense of what they were seeing. Rather than evaluating the credibility of María’s word, they had to assess her performance of a mystical experience.

When Luísa observes Friar Montero’s beckoning motion, she thinks she has spotted a flaw in this performance: a cue for María to begin the scene, a performance of ecstatic flight. Luísa’s testimony is thus not only an allegation against blindness, it is also a challenge to María’s validity as a mystic. We find, in this scene, that these two identities are linked: If María is sighted, then perhaps she saw the beckon, a cue to perform a false ecstasy; if María is blind, then she did not see the beckon and, thus, her ecstasy seems more legitimate.

Blindness and mysticism have long been linked in the European imagination. Moshe Barasch traces this linkage as it recurred throughout history in western Europe. While dominant religious discourse took non-normative bodies as blemished and unholy, he says, throughout history there have always been exceptions. Barasch points us to an
excerpt of Leviticus that prohibits non-normative bodies from approaching the holy altar:

18 For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous, 19 Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, 20 Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; 21 No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God. 32

According to Barasch, this belief that disability (blindness explicitly, among others) would defile the sacred was so powerfully held that even blind animals were prohibited from participating in these rituals as the sacrifice. 33

The exceptions to this association of blindness with the profane manifested in a recurring belief that, “some blind persons are endowed with the gift of supernatural vision…the blind person is also approached with the feeling that he has the uncanny ability to communicate with the world beyond us.” 34 Barasch traces this belief about blindness back to antiquity and locates it in the Greek iconography of the Blind Seer (eg. Tiresias). 35

In the early-modern period, Barasch locates this understanding of blindness as endowing a sort of gifted vision right alongside María, in the tradition of Spanish Mysticism. With the Reformation, he writes, came a powerful shift in religious focus from the external world to the internal. The Spanish Mystics of this time, crystallized this move towards the internal in their theological writings and their practice with an apophatic turn—the belief that divine union with God is only possible through the

32 Lev. 21:16-21 KJV
33 Barasch, Blindness, 16
34 Ibid., 29
35 Ibid., 32

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negation of the self and our encounter with the worldly. San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591), mystical protégé of Teresa of Ávila and one of the primary promulgators of apophatic mysticism, explicitly links this elevated spirituality with darkness and blindness. In his widely spread writings, Dark Night of the Soul and Ascent of Mt. Carmel, he asserts that to make room for God to enter our souls, we must relinquish our senses and to enter into complete and utter darkness. He writes,

…it is necessary to proceed by this method of disencumbering and emptying the soul, and causing it to reject the natural jurisdiction and operations of the faculties, so that they may become capable of infusion and illumination from supernatural sources; for their capacity cannot attain to so lofty an experience, but will rather hinder it, if it be not disregarded.36

Thus, according to San Juan de la Cruz, it is our senses clutter our souls with the worldly. With with sensory deprivation, however, we can clear away the earthly perceptions that distract us from conceiving of the divine. This logos of apophasis, thus seems to elevate those with sensory-impairments as less bound to this world and thus, more open to receiving God in divine union.

In their historiographical discussion of Early Modern disability, Hobgood and Wood underscore how discussions of the marginalization of the disabled often occlude this important and pervasive association of the disability and divinity. They quote historian Row-Heyveld: “Disability in the Middle Ages was characterized by its important role in a system of spiritual exchange in which the non-standard body served as a conduit for God.”37 In this “system,” able-bodied people often gave alms to the disabled and “in return, experienced an encounter with the divine facilitated by the disabled

Emphasis my own.
It is hard to ignore how precisely this summation reflects María’s relationship with her able-bodied neighbors. In exchange for alms and hot meals, María would communicate with their deceased loved ones and facilitate their divine redemption. However, Hobgood, Wood, and Row-Heyveld all purport that this system, and the concurrent divine elevation of the disabled, faded with the Counter-Reformation’s crackdown on these exchanges.39

If The Beckoning scene undoes María’s blind mystic personae, then it also exposes Friar Montero as implicated in its construction. It suggests that he knows that María is not blind, for why would he flash her a hand signal from across the room unless he knew that she would see it? It is possible that the beckon was not intended for María. Perhaps it was intended for someone else, or perhaps he was scratching an itch. If it was intended for María, then it seems he is not only aware that her blindness is fraudulent he is going further, employing this fraud to engineer yet another one—María’s fraudulent identity as mystic. The beckoning, in this case, would be a signal to cue María to begin pre-rehearsed (or at least a pre-meditated) scene in which she performs a mystic experiencing some kind of ecstatic force. Later on, in the third chapter, we will examine more closely the possible roles of Friar Montero in María’s inventions.

On August 12, 1675, Quiteria Sanchez requested to come before the court to testify for a third time. She tells to the court the following story that calls into question María’s blindness, her mystical credibility, and the Friar’s possible collusion with her in the staging of an elaborate fraud. Quiteria retells before the court an anecdote that María had told her: “Coming from Purgatory, she asked Friar Francisco Montero, her

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
confessor, who had died in the days that she was in Purgatory and he responded that a few people had, among them, he said, the pharmacist. And so La Ciega said that she thought she’d come across him in Purgatory, but only in speech and voice and she couldn’t figure out who it was.” She quotes María, ‘And now that it fits that it was him that spoke to me in Purgatory.’” And then, Quiteria reinserts herself into the narrative, saying, “All this made me realize what had passed between La Ciega and her confessor.”

While Quiteria’s commentary about the incident is vague, it is most certainly accusatory. Indeed, it is a rather suspicious exchange. It seems as though she’s fishing the Friar for new material, a new soul about which she can invent a story. It seems she’s capitalizing on her lack of sight to cover up her lack of information about the souls of Purgatory. By asking Friar who died, she can thus adjust her story to include true and relevant facts and sustain the appearance that she’s been traveling to Purgatory and communicating with its inhabitants.

It’s hard to know why María told this incriminating anecdote to Quiteria. Perhaps she thought that Quiteria would see only the façade of María’s uncanny knowledge of the souls of Purgatory. Or, had she slipped up? Could she have been trying to implicate Friar Montero as a participant in her scheme? Or was this an honest account of a blind woman’s attempt to understand the world around her? Was María telling stories? Was she leveraging her blindness to lend credibility to her act, to render her a more convincing conduit for God?

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40 Third Testimony of Quiteria Sanchez [Q]  
AHN, Inq., August 12, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 42
These questions bring us to another one of Barasch’s salient icons of blindness: the Blind Bard. This is not to say that María, in her storytelling or performances, was channeling the likes of Homer. It is just to bring our attention to the prevalence of these art forms in the history of the blind. Natalie Kononenko-Moyle examines how ‘the Blind Bard’ image existed as a legend on the one hand and a lived reality for many blind people on the other. She writes,

The factor common to all minstrels is that they are compelled to accept their profession by some kind of external force, be it economic necessity, physical disability, or an emotional crisis that precludes following one of the usual occupations and prompts entering minstrelsy, instead.41

Kononenko-Moyle observes that occupations of minstrel, storyteller, and bard were most often filled by the blind, the poor, and the orphaned, three of the most defining components of María’s social identity. All of this is just to say that blind people in situations like María’s have, throughout history, turned to performance and storytelling arts as the best way to improve their lot.

While María’s performance of mystic in The Beckon is flawed, it somehow leaves me more convinced of her earnest. Even if it is all an act, we see in this scene that she is not merely fibbing or telling tall tales; she is committed to assuming this identity and does her best to embody it, to convince her peers, her confessor, and possibly even herself, of her mystical identity.

There is, of course, also the possibility that María’s ecstatic flight across the Church was a genuine, God-sent mystical experience. Luísa Sanchez does give substantial evidence to the contrary, but I am willing to concede that perhaps the legal logos does not hold up when evaluating mystical realm that breaks our most tried-and-true laws, like say, gravity. So, for the purposes of an open-minded investigation, I will leave that possibility somewhere on the table.
Friar Maroto testifies before the Tribunal on June 6th. He tries to ignore how the muggy courtroom aggravates his sweating habit. Thinking of sweat makes him sweat. He clears his throat,

“It was clean--practically spotless. I always keep a clean handkerchief in my pocket, nothing extravagant, just an old scrap of silk--but clean, always clean.”

He digs his hand deep into his cloak and pulls out the kerchief. He holds it up before the courtroom and it moves like an extension of him, a loose sheet of pinkish skin.

He takes the occasion to dab at the beads of perspiration clinging to his temples.

“Yes,” he says, “one must always be prepared.”

Friar Maroto begins, as he often does when he’s nervous, to quote the bible:

“‘Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.’ John 4:1. What does this verse teach us? It teaches us that there is no faith without probation, no faith without trial. This was my intent, that evening at the house of Gabriel Rayado. It was to clear away the murk, to sweep away the shadows so there was no place to hide--it was to bring María Cotanilla under the light, so we--her neighbors, her Church, and her Lord God--could see her, once and for all, for what she truly was.” The pink kerchief quivers in his hand.

He had been nervous the evening of the Pañuelo Test and had quote the bible then, too.
“The wicked free when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.’
This is what I whispered to her that night as she protested, whipping her head this way and that.

‘The company is warm, the food has been rich,’ I said to her, ‘What have you to fear, child?’ Still, she back away from me as I approached her. I held the kerchief out and brushed it against her hands,

‘Not to worry,’ I said, ‘the blindfold is clean as our good, Christian souls.’
She muttered something under her breath.

‘What was that child?’ I asked.
She turned to face me, ‘I said, do not put stumbling blocks before the blind.’

I chided her gently, ‘However could a blindfold make stumble one who is already blind? Blindfold or no blindfold, to you, Ciega, it should make no difference.’ I motioned for Ana Ruíz to bring María the handkerchief. Ana smoothed María’s hair and held the blindfold before her eyes. Ana brought the two loose ends to meet at the nape of her neck and, as she cinched them tight, María seemed to go limp. She began to pace again, to mutter to herself. As she walked past me, I strained my ears to hear what she was saying.

‘Mark 14:65. Some of them began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and kept hitting him with their fists and telling him, ‘Prophesy!’ Even the servants took him and slapped him around. Even the servants,’ she droned on.
She fumbled and fretted and began walking straight into the front door, blind as death itself. She stopped just short of the wood frame and reached for the handle, still muttering. She opened the door and walked into the cool, the dark of the evening,
shouting now, “They blindfolded him and kept hitting him with their fists and telling him, "Prophesy!" telling him, “Prophesy!” Even the servants.”

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The Pañuelo Test, designed by Friar Maroto, is a cruel and humiliating interrogation of María’s blindness. It puts her body and her disability on display for the onlookers to judge as valid or invalid. For all of its cruelty, the Pañuelo Test is a rather clever test. The premise is simple: if María is truly blind, then a blindfold should be no handicap to her, since she has no sight of which to be deprived. By Maroto’s measure, the test is only invasive if María is guilty of fraud—if she is a sighted person posing as a blind one. If she is innocent, then there is no harm done and the whole thing is like a game of blind man’s bluff, like the illustration above depicts. And if she is guilty, then the invasiveness—the carefully placed stumbling block before her—is validated. This is where much of the brilliance of the Pañuelo Test lies: it self-justifies. It is either harmless or necessary.

So, what do we make of María’s resistance to the test? Maroto testifies that María only agreed to participate after persistent persuasion from the company that evening at Señor Rayado’s house. Was she indignant at the proposal of such a humiliating test, or was she hiding something? What do we make of the fact that she failed the test? Does this change how we understand her embodiment of blindness?
As we saw in Scene 1, María reveals very little information about her blindness: she declares its existence, that it happened when she was five, and she encourages others to call her La Ciega. The second thing Ana Ruíz says in her September xx testimony is the following: “La Ciega had always said that she couldn’t see anything.” Ana goes on express her gut feeling that María could see and, ultimately, recounts the Pañuelo Test scene, concluding “having gone from the door to the street perfectly without the pañuelo, when it was attached, she couldn’t see and that [Ana] felt she could infer that she did have some sight.”

When grapple with María’s incriminating failure, we must remember that the Pañuelo Test only permits two possible outcomes: 1) María is completely blind and therefore is not impaired by a blindfold or 2) María is not 100 percent blind. This second category, an outcome of failure, includes a spectrum of visual acuity ranging from 99 percent blind to 0 percent blind. For if María’s eyes receive any semblance of visual information—any blotches of color, vague shapes, any light whatsoever, no matter how faintly—then a blindfold would affect her sensory access to her surroundings and could thus result in the kind of blundering folly Maroto pictures in his testimony. This is fairly likely—the statistic currently put forth by the American Foundation for the Blind is that only 15% of people with eye disorders experience total blindness, or NLP (no light perception), even of legally blind Americans, only 20% perceive just light or less—the

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42 First testimony of Ana Ruíz [Q]
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r

43 Ibid. [Q]
rest have some visual recognition of form or color. So, even if she was not totally blind, she may very well have been what we would call, legally blind.

If María is partially sighted and partially blind, then why would she have always claimed to be totally blind? It seems as though this would set her up to look a fraud; if anyone found out she have any semblance of sight, then it seems that she has invented her entire disability. In fact, I would argue, this is probably just what happened in the incident of the Pañuelo Test.

I suggest that María was probably partially blind—whether mostly or only somewhat, I don’t know—and, further, I argue that she had good reason to portray herself as totally blind. In her study of the social history of disability, Irina Metzler characterizes the medieval period as governed by a fear of “the fake body, the body that pretends to be one thing but is in fact quite another: the theatrical delusion of the fraudulent beggar’s artificially disabled body.” Metzler examines how this fear was tangled up on religious and civil precepts on begging. In the Middle Ages, the Church codified distinctions between “worthy” and “undeserving” beggars. The “worthy” category consistently included the disabled (sometimes blind people in particular) and the Church encouraged giving alms to these beggars. On the other hand, almsgiving to an “unworthy” beggar, an able-bodied person with earning potential, was denounced as facilitating sloth. Further, Church writers and theologians instructed people to be wary of fraudulent beggars—abled-bodied people presenting as disabled to appear more

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46 Ibid., 177
47 Ibid., 169
“worthy” of charity. Metzler quotes English theologian Thomas of Chobham writing in the 13th-century that, beggars “frequently transfigure themselves into the appearance of the wretched, so that they seem more destitute [literally: have greater need] than they really are, and thus deceive others so that they will receive more.”

Many European city governments implemented policies that, like the Church’s, distinguished the “deserving” vs. “undeserving” poor and criminalized “false mendicancy.” Michel Mollat observes that civil governments forced beggars to wear official badges, so that they could be monitored by state and also but also so that they could be easily identified before the public. Even hospitals sometimes issued their own badges, which marked a beggar as “deserving” by legitimating whatever disability or ailment they presented. In 1350, England made very clear its definition of “undeserving” beggar by banning begging outright for all those able-bodied and under sixty years of age.

These policies went further to mandate mass participation in their enforcement, such that the public was necessarily implicated in these beggar-discernment processes. Mons, France and Leuven, Belgium’s Poor Tables, which collected common alms for public assistance, “were forbidden to distribute charity indiscriminately to all comers” but rather had to allocate resources exclusively to the “deserving poor.” In England, any individual who gave unsanctioned alms—giving charity based on their own codification of the “deserving poor”—could be arrested and imprisoned.

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48 Ibid., 169
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 290
52 Ibid., 291
53 Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 291
The stakes were high around these issues and anxieties crystallized around possible upsets or ambiguities in the “worthy” vs. “unworthy” beggar dichotomy. In many cases, these fears hovered around beggars with non-normative presenting bodies, for behind any disability could be a disguise for an “unworthy beggar.” This fear of the fraudulent beggar seeped onto the folios of Early Modern literature and theater. Dramatized as such, it staged new villains, their scams, and reified the heroic characters that foil such fraud. Wheatley observes how these theme, presented on the Early Modern stage, affected audience attitudes towards disability, particularly blindness, and fraud. He makes one particularly salient point about beggar discernment and theater: [T]he (presumably) sighed actor’s performance as a blind man instantiates the figure of the false mendicant that medieval society feared and hated; an effective performance would have confirmed the belief that blindness could be persuasively feigned.”

The parsing of blindness of the stage, thus, only reified anxieties of fraud.

With a wider focus, on disability in general, Coker examines how this impetus to unveil the imposter played out on the early modern stage and in the streets. She hones in on a trope she calls, “the dismantling of disability drag.” She gives an example: a tale entitled, “The Imposture of a Woman Beggar Who Pretended to Have a Canker on Her Breast,” by French surgeon, Ambroise Paré. The story begins with a beggar who holds a cringe-worthy soiled cloth to her apparently cankered breast. The brother, however, notices that aside from this egregious sore, she seems plump and pink—the picture of health. Suspicious, Paré’s companion pulls back the beggar’s dress and exposes her breast, upon which she has placed a “sponge soaked and imbued with animal blood and

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with milk” to hide a “teat healthy and whole in as good condition as the other.”\textsuperscript{55} This narrative imagines participation in the discernment process as a heroic act. We see Paré’s companion’s discerning eye, his resolve to test his suspicions, his taking matters into his own hands, saves society from “squandering” alms on an “unworthy” beggar.

Every day people were constantly (and still are) conducting their own discernment processes and developing commonsense metrics of who was “deserving” of their charity. Metzler writes,

\begin{quote}
Whatever the elite texts said, common people readily believed the evidence of their own are quite pragmatically differentiated between the physical impairment that was genuine, because it was so disabling, and an active performance by a fraud.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

We see this same basic narrative of suspicion, invasion, trial, exposure, and the ultimate triumph of felling a fraud, played out in Señor Rayado’s house on the night in question. We see María’s neighbors attempt a heroic act; like the surgeon’s companion, they take matters into their own hands and conduct a physical examination of the non-normative body in question.

The anxiety around María’s disability, must have hung in the air, diffuse but present, in her every interaction. I imagine living under that unrelenting scrutiny from her neighbors, their desire to categorize her body, and I can imagine María claiming total blindness over partial blindness in order to make herself more legible to her neighbors, to relieve the pressures of an unstable identity. Whatever visual acuity she possessed may have actually worked against María, by rendering her less “deserving” of the charity she depended on for sustenance. It may have increased suspicions of fraudulence. It seems

\textsuperscript{55} Lauren Coker, “‘There is no suff'ring due’: Metatheatricality and Disability in Volpone,” In Recovering Disability in Early Modern England, compiled by David Houston Wood and Allison P. Hobgood, 105-22 (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2013), 125.

\textsuperscript{56} Metzler, A Social History of Disability, 172
thus, that in some ways, María’s best survival tactic is total blindness. Metzler picks up on this irony, writing that the beggar’s world is “a world turned upside down, with its internal logic that the more disfigured, maimed, or mutilated a person is, or pretends to be, the richer they are through greater income from alms, in contrast to the real world, where ‘honest’, hard work is the necessary prerequisite for material gains.”

What exactly was Maroto trying to bring to light with the Pañuelo Test? Is he trying to reveal the truth about María’s embodied blindness? His test, as we have discussed, only indicates whether or not María is one-hundred percent blind. Thus, it does not seem as though he is trying to reveal a true, precise, or accurate assessment of María’s blindness. Friar Maroto concedes in his testimony that María is most likely at least somewhat visually-impaired, but as his test does not permit this outcome, he essentially sets her up to fail. What’s more, by acknowledging the spectrum of blindness in his testimony and ignoring it in his test, it seems that Friar Maroto is actually obscuring the truth about María’s real, embodied visual acuity.

We can only wonder why he designed such a damning test. Was he trying to reveal the ‘truth’ relieve anxieties around her blindness and their inability to fix it with certainty onto a legible category? Was he trying to reveal María’s exploitation of these categories to present herself as more worthy of charity and support from the community? Coker analyzes the story of the woman with the fake cankered breast, “the perception that her disease lacks materiality is bound up with the perception that her performance puts a strain on the larger social body.” Was Maroto trying to display María’s blindness as a performance to call attention to the strain she puts on the villagers

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57 Metzler, *A Social of Blindness*, 171
58 Coker, “‘There is no suff’ring due,’” 126
of Colmenar? We’ve seen already from the witness testimony that the villagers of Colmenar have felt María’s strain on them. They had fed her and invited her into their homes and to their social gatherings often to disastrous effects, Ana had housed her, cared for her, and dealt with her possessions and stubbornness for twelve years. Were the villagers of Colmenar tired of María’s strain? If they were looking for grounds to sever their obligations to her as a disabled woman in need, then why didn’t they? They did not seem to use María’s failure of the test as impetus to cut her off: she continues to live in the Ruíz sisters’ house and continues to beg alms.

I argue, however, that the impulse to expose María, to cast her in a shadow of fraud may have been more a result of her ascent out of poverty than the strain she exerted with it. As the witnesses deliver character sketches of María before the court, we see a recurring theme: a disparaging account of María’s tendency towards dressing “above her sphere.” Ana Bazan mentions giving María a skirt of French serge.\(^59\) Ana García, another witness that I have not mentioned in the story, uses this exact language in her testimonies against María.\(^60\) Ana Ruíz testifies that she confronted María about this saying, “the dress you’ve put on is not in proportion to your extreme poverty.”\(^61\) Ana elaborates, as we saw in Chapter 1, that María loved going to social gatherings, dancing, adorning herself, putting ribbons in her hair, and cuffs on her wrists. This does not just bother Ana because it is out of touch with María’s lowly social status; it upsets her because it inverts Ana’s social rank in relations to María’s. She says, “Sometimes, I was

\(^{59}\) First testimony of Ana Bazan [Q]  
AHN, Inq., September 10, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 67

\(^{60}\) First testimony of Ana Ruíz [Q]  
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r

\(^{61}\) Ibid., f. 64v
embarrassed to go into public with her, because, alongside her, I looked her servant.” I argue that it is in these moments, when María stretches the bounds of Colmenar’s social spheres, that the villagers feel the strain of her performance most. For, in doing so, she isn’t depending on her neighbors for charity, she is taking advantage of them for her personal gain. While we don’t know exactly when the Pañuelo Test occurred, I suggest that it may have been in response to María’s rise as a mystic, her crafting of a new social sphere, divinely-chartered, especially for her. Here we see a reprisal of the link between blindness and mysticism that we observed in Scene 2, “The Beckon.” Perhaps Maroto’s purpose in the Pañuelo Test was simply to expose María as a fraud. It was not to prove anything exactly; it was to pique suspicions not only about her performance of blindness but also about her mystical performance. The test itself was also perhaps inspired by a desire to topple María’s elevated social construction and to restore her to ‘rightful’ place on the bottom rung.

The Pañuelo Test has an intent to humiliate. I imagine it as an excruciating moment in María’s life. When Ana Ruíz mentions it in her testimony, she lists those in attendance: “Friar Maroto, María, Ana and Luísa Rayado (sisters) and Lucía Ruíz.” So, including Ana Ruíz, there were at least five other people in the room that evening. There were five people who interrogated María’s blindness that night and watched her body fail. And among these five people are the two women with whom María shares a home. I am curious to know how Lucía Ruíz, Ana’s deaf sister engaged in the scrutiny that night,

62 First testimony of Ana Ruíz [Q] AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r

63 First testimony of Ana Ruíz [Q] AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61r
but in her brief testimony it gets no mention. In any case, the Ruiz sisters’ participation in the Pañuelo Test strikes me as a sharp betrayal.

The Pañuelo, the handkerchief itself, is thus an agent of betrayal and humiliation. Barasch devotes significant attention to deep-seeded connotations of blindfold as a highly “charged” object. “On the one hand, it was a sign of profound humiliation; on the other,” a less common interpretation, “it was understood as dignified, under divine protection.”64 The blindfold emerged in European art in the Middle Ages, Barasch continues, particularly for the portrayal of these ambivalent allegorical figures—to depict their blindness and distinguish it from the image of the common blind person, the Blind Beggar.

Barasch finds these contradictory connotations of the blindfold fully charged in the scene of Christ’s derision. The Romans, having just captured Jesus, brought him before the High Priest to await the mandate of his execution. When the High Priest interrogates him, Jesus finally states that his is the son of God, “and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” The High Priest condemns him for blasphemy and, before the moment of derision in which the whole court jeers at him, mocks, spits at him, beats him, they blindfold him.

To be clear, the trial does not indicate anything María said during the Pañuelo Test, but when I read Mark’s account of the derision, my mind immediately went to María: enduring excruciating trial process before a crowd of nonbelievers, a leering jury that has already determined the verdict. I imagine the blindfolded María thinking about the blindfolded Jesus—the perfect image of graceful humiliation, of ambiguous identity misunderstood, the quintessential model for how to wear a blindfold with dignity.

64 Barasch, Blindness, 87
No more than ten sentences of the trial are devoted to the Pañuelo Test. But I wanted to dilate this moment where the complexities of these relationships spills off the page, carrying all the unsaid words and unspoken emotion with it. It is a moment of makeshift trial, humiliation, betrayal, anxiety, and attempts to live in and against legible social categories. What’s more, I wanted to open up this scene and pull us into that excruciating room in Gabriel Rayado’s house. The Pañuelo scene exposes us to something we have never seen before: a certainly and totally blind María. Regardless of what kind of eyes they cover, the blindfold renders María completely sightless. We are forced to watch María embody this total blindness and then to make sense of her failure. The Pañuelo Test implicates us in the discernment of María’s body. We stand there, with her neighbors, and must watch her stumble and fall.
Primary Source Citations

Scene 1 – Visions of Vision
The bedroom of María Cotanilla
Date: Unknown

“In any case…her sight, forever”
First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 163v

“Don’t call me…perhaps my name” [Q]
Testimony of María Cotanilla against Friar Montero
AHN, Inq., April 14, 1676, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 21v

“She was winding…contemplating the Trinity”
First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 168v

“Cantas con voz…al que llora” [Q]
Inscription on church bells of Colmenar de Oreja
Freire 385

“She saw, right…mind’s feeble eye”
First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 168v

“Although she could…flash of light”
Ibid.

“And then I…darkness once again” [Q]
Ibid.

Scene 2 - The Beckon
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
July 8th, 1675

First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 35v
Scene 3 - The Pañuelo Test
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
June 6th, 1675

First testimony of Friar Maroto
AHN, Inq., June 6, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 19v
Chapter 3.
The Sexual, the Demonic, and the Candlestick

Scene 1 – The Friar’s File
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
August 19th, 1674

Diego Ximenez de Soto, notary of the Inquisition, is assigned to compile the proceedings in the trial of Friar Francisco Montero. There will be some new testimony to transcribe in the months to come. But for the moment, Diego copies over relevant excerpts from the recently closed trial of María Cotanilla, the Friar’s penitent. So much has already been said over the past few years in Cotanilla’s case. But of course, Diego thinks, you can never know exactly what it is that you don’t know.

Diego finds one testimony already filed in Montero’s case. It seems to have little to do with María Cotanilla or her propositions of sanctity, but Diego leaves it there as the first testimony.

In the village of Colmenar de Oreja this nineteenth day of the month of August of one-thousand, seven-hundred, and seventy-seven years, before his mercy, Señor Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero, Commissary of the Holy Office, appeared, without being called, a woman named Ana del Castillo…

Although she was not summoned by the Inquisition to testify, this woman did not appear before the court of her own accord. This becomes clear to Diego as he continues reading.

The witness declared that a few days ago she had confessed with the Señor commissioner a certain thing and his mercy said that he could not absolve me unless I declared it outside of the confessional. And the witness left that day insconsolable. And
so she has remained since the day this happened until now, when she can at last be absolved.

She declared before the court what she had confessed on that said occasion:

It was a day just after Easter time and she was in the Parish Church to hear mass. She was near a confessional booth, right next to the Chancel screen by the altar of Our Lady Carmen. In this Confessional, sat Father Friar Francisco Montero. And said Friar Montero told this witness that he needed to have a word with her. Having heard this, she went the confessional where the Friar was sitting and knelt down on her knees, as one does when one goes to confession. And, so, in this position, the Friar told this witness that he had a great desire to enjoy her. To which she responded that he should watch himself, because she was an honorable woman and not inclined to these behaviors. The witness was very upset by all of this and she got up. She was scared by what he had told her and what had happened. She put herself to pray, but she could not and she determined that she should leave and go home. She got up to do so but the Friar, who had stayed sitting in the confessional, spoke to her again. And this witness returned and knelt on her knees and he was seated as they had been positioned the first time. He said to her ‘now that we’re here like this, don’t you want to do me the mercy of that which I have asked you. Do me mercy in giving me even one kiss or two?’ To this, the witness responded, ‘whoever does this will do the other and, as such, I do not want to.’ And, shaken by what had happened, she got up and went home.

Asked if at any other time, before or after this happened, she confessed to Friar Montero

She said that before she confessed a few times but that he had never solicited her or anything like this. And after this happened, she never confessed at any point to the Friar.

Asked if, in the two times that the Friar called her over, he had said any words of flirting or love or if he touched her with his hands or with his feet or if he had solicited her for some dishonest thing because it does not seem natural that they should have halted in proceeding into something of this sort for him to tell her what she said that he said and has declared

She said that she says that which she has and that nothing more happened than what she had declared.

Asked if she knows or has heard tell of Friar soliciting any other woman in the act of confession or under this pretext

She said that she does not know nor has she heard tell of anything.
Scene 2 - La Ciega and Montero, friend to women
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
December 4, 1675

Diego Ximenez de Soto combs through the neatly parted lines of script. He is searching María Cotanilla’s testimony for incriminating details against Friar Montero. He comes across something that she had said on December 4th, 1675. He reads over the paragraph a few times and copies it over in perfect rows, his letters looping across the page in thick, black ringlets. He begins a new section, halfway across the page.

The following testimony was provided by María Cotanilla on December 4th, 1675, when she was imprisoned and held reclusively in the secret prisons of this Sacred Office for crimes of illusion and for obscene and scandalous propositions. On this aforementioned date, in her hearing before the Inquisitor Paniagua, she both confessed her own guilt and put forth several accusations against her Confessor, the said Friar Francisco Montero.

She said she went to her Confessor, Friar Francisco Montero, with these propositions because she knew he would take it as good. She knew, as she had been told by several villagers (whose names she could not recall) on many occasions that he was unscrupulous, crooked, and a friend to women.

Diego pauses a moment and scrawls in the margin so that no Inquisitor should miss it:

Friar Francisco Montero-
Friend to women.

He continues reading. La Ciega’s testimony is rather convoluted, inconsistent. Aside from naming him a “friend to women,” she had hardly said anything at all about the Friar. It seemed, rather, that she had spoken through rumors and accusatory murmurings that she couldn’t quite trace to any one person’s mouth. But, Diego copies down all La Ciega said that day, word for word, to be filed along with all the other bits of testimony.
There was one of these accusations, however, that she did attribute to a particular source:

“One one occasion, Antonio Bustos, villager of this Colmenar de Oreja, approached me after church,

‘You do confess to Friar Montero with such frequency, Ciega, wouldn’t you say?’ I remember his tone struck me as peculiar. It made me rather uneasy, but I responded plainly,

‘Yes, Señor Bustos, I would say so. He is, after all, my only Confessor.’

Antonio Bustos’s tone only intensified. He brought mouth closer to my ear, brought his voice down to a coarse whisper.

‘Heed, Cieguita. You hear me? Take care. For, if you are not careful, you will leave that Confessional one day with a son.’

Now, the court should know, Señor Bustos often says harsh and provocative things, but this was quite unsettling. He meant, I gathered, that he took Father Friar Montero as errantly inclined towards women. And I had heard such things before from other villagers. As I did their laundry all those years many other women would say to me things quite similar:

‘Keep confessing to Friar Montero, Ciega, and see what happens. Keep your guard, Ciega, you must protect yourself.’

The Inquisitor had responded:

“It strikes me as odd—or shall I say, implausible—that so many villagers would tell you to guard yourself from the said Friar Montero, if they had not seen some thing that called their attention. If they had not seen something that would lead them to intervene…”
María replied:

“It’s not that these accusations are entirely unfounded, you see, I just mean to say that I was never involved…illicitly, I suppose one could say…with the Friar. It was June of 1673—a year and a half ago now, when Friar Montero asked me to locate the soul of a certain Magistrate. He approached me with such unease, I remember clearly, the slight shake in his voice. And this unease around the soul of the Magistrate, by my judgment, sprang from the fact that Friar Montero engaged in illicit relations with the Magistrate’s widow.”

“And what cause have you to presume and pass judgment that the said Friar Montero treated the Magistrate’s widow illicitly?” The Inquisitor asked.

“Well, I was in the Friar’s home one day. Gathering his clothes to launder, when we heard a knock on the door. The Friar answered and a servant girl came in. She was carrying jug of wine and a plate of hot fritters that smelled to high heaven.”

The inquisitor interjected:

“It is asked that the accused answer the question originally put forth and that she hold her attention to the relevant information.”

María continued:

“And the servant girl says to the Friar,

‘These are a gift from my mistress, the Lady Marta’

And I asked, ‘Who is Lady Marta?’ and the Friar, responded,

‘Lady Marta Zarceno, the widow of the late Magistrate.’

It was then I knew—she was engaging in an illicit relationship with my confessor. In fact, to be perfectly truthful before the court, I must say that I am not quite sure that I am using the world ‘illicit’ correctly. I suppose it has a negative implication, of dishonesty
and whatnot, so I will reform my statement, because I hold Lady María Zarceno in high esteem and know that she maintains all her relationships with great honor.”

Diego wonders how anyone could make sense of these vacillations: accuse, recuse, excuse. Still, he copies it down word for word. The only utterances María claimed as her own was the following:

“With respect to all this gossip, I would like to emphasize before the court that I had entered the Friar’s house regularly, many, many times to wash his clothes, but I never had anything with him. Nothing between us.”

Scene 3 – Diego Ximenez de Soto’s Report
From the desk of Diego Ximenez de Soto
November 19th, 1677

Three days after he finishes copying María’s testimony, Diego Ximenez de Soto writes a report to the Tribunal overseeing Friar Montero’s case:

In the City of Madrid, the nineteenth day of the month of November of one-thousand, six-hundred, and seventy-seven years, the Magistrate of the Sacred Inquisition having seen the process against Friar Francisco Montero of the Augustinian Order brought before the Inquisition of Toledo, it is declared that the case be continued until its resolution.

And before finalizing the witness testimony, Antonio Bustos should be called before the court and questioned as to his comments alluding that, if she were not careful, María Cotanilla might leave Confessional pregnant.

And it is signed by:

Diego Ximenez de Soto
Scene 4 – Antonio Bustos Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
February 4th, 1678

Over a year later, Antonio Bustos finally does come to testify before the Holy Office of the Inquisition. However, he does not say much. They ask him why he thinks he’s been called to testify. He says he has no idea. They ask him if he ever warned María Cotanilla, vulgarly called La Ciega, about a certain Friar of the Augustinian Order, Father Friar Franciscio Monero—if he ever warned her that she should be careful confessing to him and spending so many hours alone with him, else she might have a child. Antonio Bustos says he recalls no such conversation and that he has nothing more to say before the court.

Later that same day, the inquisitor summons Antonio back into the court chamber. The inquisitor says that he needs Antonio to ratify his testimony. He asks Antonio if he is very certain that he has nothing to add or retract from his testimony. Antonio responds,

“This very day I gave my deposition before your mercy and before the present notary and all I can say now is what I have already deposed.”

They read him back his testimony from earlier that day and ask him again if he has anything else to add or retract or change. He insists that he does not.

Scene 5 - Seventy-Seven Days
The Mendietta-Sanchez Household
Date: Unknown

María is in the midst of a seventy-seven-day period of temptation to her chastity—or at least that’s what Quiteria seems to believe. “The devil is testing her,”
Quiteria explains to her husband, Bernardo, over dinner. “He’s sending her visions and
demons and every night she’s had to fend them off and protect her chastity.” Bernardo
does not particularly care to discuss demons over dinner nor, for that matter, La Ciega’s
carnal fantasies. But Quiteria can talk about little else for these seventy-seven days, so
Bernardo just spoons a bay leaf floating in his stew. Quiteria is glad to do all the talking
anyways.

“The other day, La Ciega told me she was standing outside the San Franciscan
Convent. It was just before dawn and she was waiting for the gates to open for morning
mass. She heard a noise on the road behind her. And the noise turned into footsteps and
then a voice. She didn’t recognize the voice, which is odd, because we both know how
keenly the woman can identify a voice. So this strange man spoke to her and said the
sweetest words of affection. Mmm, I was so impressed by them at the time--what were
they exactly?” Quiteria puts a finger before her pursed lips for a moment.

“Ahh! Yes, I remember now. It was,

‘Welcome is a sight like yours, as light to day, as health to a sick man.’

Something to that effect. Well, La Ciega told me she was speechless. But she
managed to stammer out,

‘Excuse me, Señor, but may I ask who you are and whence you come?’

And he replied,

‘Worry not, my black-haired beauty, it is no arduous pilgrimage to travel
to your lips,’

And then, he presented her with all of these grand offerings and promises:

‘Come with me, my sweet, I will take you with me to Madrid and I will
marry you and you shall wear the finest dress, all white silk brocade, full
sleeves embroidered with golden pomegranates. I can see you now, looking positively regal in your full corset bodice, satin ribbons dancing in your hair like wind itself.’

And La Ciega, again, was speechless. She was very taken with the man and all of his lovely words, but she was resolute not to jeopardize her chastity. He was, after all, a stranger. So, she bade the man farewell and asked that he please leave her be. Moments after he left, a girl arrived at the Convent gates to wait for mass and María asked her,

‘Who was that man that just came to speak with me? What did he look like and in which direction did he set off?’

And, hear this, Bernardo, the girl responded,

‘What man? I saw you while I was a ways down the road and you have been alone this whole time, talking to no one.’

She knew he was the devil. She told me,

‘He was so suave and spoke so elegantly, that I knew it could only be the Devil himself come to make me fall.’

Her resolve and humility impressed me, I must say. She would die to wear a dress like the one he promised, Bernardo; it’s precisely the dress of her dreams. And you know La Ciega has only been to Madrid once and it was with that sausage-of-a-man, Friar Maroto. But still, she resisted the gentleman’s propositions,” Quiteria lets out a dry laugh, “More than I could probably say for myself.”
“Mmmm,” Bernardo responds as he gets up from the table. His every motion, he feels, is a potent demonstration of his disapproval. Quiteria, in her wistful state, however, does not seem to notice.

Scene 6 - How They Left Her
The Plaza Mayor
September 2nd, 1675 – Date: Unknown

Ana Ruiz makes her way home from the secret court chambers of the Inquisition. She looks down as she approaches the Plaza Nueva and watches the sand-colored cobble stones approach her and, one by one, pass under her feet. She has tried to shut her memories of the seventy-seven days in certain well-guarded chambers of her mind. But the inquisitor had gone and pried them open.

Ana knows these seventy-seven days as brutal carnal torment. And she knows them better than anyone else, besides perhaps, La Ciega herself. She knows them as night-shattering shrieks and wails, of unbridled terror in the pitch dark, of bare white skin, clawed at and bruised with the worst shades of midnight. And blood. This period of temptation in La Ciega’s life had scoured the surface of Ana’s mind, abrading the soft tissue of her memory, rubbing it raw. They were everywhere, these seventy-seven days.

They are by the stove, near the kitchen, it’s eight or nine pm. Coming down through the floorboards, in that awful sound—The Paq Paq Paq Paq. They’re flooding the downstairs, the Paq Paq, the periodic pause and the ensuing wails. It’s on the stairs as I follow the Paq Paq sound up to the second floor. They are outside my bedroom as I hold my breath and open the door. Paq Paq. They are on my bed. She is on my bed. Her shirt, thrown on the floor. She’s kneeling, her breasts on her knees, forehead wedged in the crook of her arm. The other arm, behind her, she clutches her left shoe. They are
there, on the sole of María’s shoe as she beats it against her bare buttocks. Paq Paq Paq Paq. Her is skin, raw, bloodied where the heel has landed. Paq Paq. They are in the back of my throat as I try to yell over María’s cries. “Leave her, spirits! I mandate by all the virtue of Saintly obedience that you leave this woman be!” Ana remembers dressing María, who was too shaken and sore to dress herself. She had tried to look away from the purpling, orange welts from her heel, each one a full harvest moon.

For Ana, these seventy-seven days are punctuated with María’s refrain: *This is how they left me.* They, of course, being the demons. *Always the demons.* Ana begins to walk around the perimeter of the Plaza. She recalls the night when she awoke to a knock on her bedroom door. When she opened the door, she was face to face with María’s naked body. She looked much smaller in only her flesh, paler too.

“María!” she had said, her voice sharper than she had intended, “why are you coming to me like this?” María’s head had rolled a bit about her shoulder. She spread her palms wide on either side of her, fingers especially angular next to her rounded, bare hips. “This—” she had said in a gruff whisper, “This is how they left me.”

Ana’s eye catches on a particularly smooth cobblestone. The slow stream of stones is slightly dizzying compared with her racing thoughts. She runs her hand along the arcade walls. *This is how they left me.* Ana had thought María meant that they had stripped her down, the demons—that they had stripped her down and done heaven knows what to her and then, they had left her naked at Ana’s door. *This is how they left me.*

Another occasion, they left her in the corral. The little girl who lived down the road ran screaming to the house.

“Ana! Ana! It’s la Ciega! She’s frozen in the corral and won’t get up. O is she dead, Ana? Come quick!”
Ana rushed out behind the girl. The demons had left her clothed this time, clothed but on all fours in the snow. Ana could tell she had been there for hours. Her fingers had begun to blue at the tips, her lips to split and bleed.

“María!” Ana shouted. No response. She shoed away the child.

“Run home, child. Leave us here a while.” The girl obeyed.

Ana squatted in the snow beside María’s limp form. She turned María onto her back and took her color-drained face in both of her hands.

“María! Speak to me!” Ana began to weep as a darker shade of azure replaced the one that came before it.

María started to shiver. Ana leaned over her, brought her face closer to María’s.

“Th-this is how they left me”

Ana ran to fetch Lucía. Together, the two women carried María inside and into her bed. María screamed as the blood rushed back to her fingers, “Hot! Hot! O how it burns.” Ana had tried to remove her ice-caked clothing. But each time she had reached for a tie or a clasp or button, María had shrieked and slapped her arm away. No matter how she had cooed and coaxed, María would not let Ana touch her, much less remove any articles of clothing. María had curled herself into a ball and Ana had stood a minute in the doorway before leaving. She left the door open behind her.

_This-this is how. This is how they_—Ana’s fingers catch on a cranny in the arcade wall. She tries to shake the refrain from her head.
Since María arrived at Quiteria’s house that afternoon, she has not touched the pair of trousers she brought to sew. She is well into her seventy-seven days of carnal temptations and Quiteria can’t help but notice the greyish bags accumulating under her eyes.

“The demons, Quiteria, they don’t let me sleep through the night. They hang over me in the dark. I lie awake still as stone. I fear they are right there in front of my face, cloaked in the black. The most terrible things happen in the dark of night, Quiteria. You know that.”

Quiteria keeps her eyes down on the salmon shirt sleeve she is mending. La Ciega has frightened Quiteria of late. Such talk, she thinks, is not meant to be shared over mending. Still, she tries to put a bit of warmth in her voice, “Well, Ciega, I hope you find some sleep tonight.”

Later, while frying sardines for supper, Quiteria wonders about the demons María had mentioned. What sorts of evil things do they do to keep her up at night? Quiteria’s curiosity follows her into bed that night and she falls asleep with the blanket to her chin.

It’s early afternoon the next day when María returns. Quiteria is simmering an olla podrida and wonders if María will ask to stay for lunch. “Good afternoon, Ciega. Did you manage a few hours of sleep last night I hope?” Quiteria holds open the door as María ambles into the house.

María begins talking as if already in the middle of a sentence.

“I had closed the door last night. I latched it, too. But still, they flooded my room, the demons. Out of the darkness, a figure emerged. It came towards me slowly at
first, a man—a soldier, I think. Then, all of a sudden he charged at me and he spoke in what sounded like many voices. They rattled my bedframe. They boomed,

‘Come, Ciega, you must lie with us!’

And then, O it was the most terrible vision, Quiteria. For, then, the soldier man became many soldiers—a whole army. And they all charged at me from across the room. They moved so quickly it seemed, headed straight for me, shouting the whole while, ‘You must lie with us!’

I dropped to my knees, lowered my head and I began to pray. I cried to the heavens, ‘O Almighty God, liberate me from these visions!’ And all of a sudden, God sent a great billow of smoke to swallow up the soldiers. And from the great heat that enveloped me, it seemed that the smoke had come to embrace me and then it carried me gently to my bed. O Quiteria, I’m quite shaken, but I tell you, I have never been so relieved.”

Quiteria is far from relieved. That night, when she closes her eyes, she sees an army of monstrous men—rows and rows of them—charging. She tosses and turns all night and Bernardo moves to the very edge of the bed.

Quiteria is oddly quiet through breakfast the next morning; Bernardo, oddly vocal.

“Heavens, Quiteria, I can’t take it anymore! She stumbles in here as if we owe her something and then fills your head with these horrific, gruesome notions and then—then you can’t sleep at night! And you know what happens when you can’t sleep, Quiteria? I can’t sleep either. I tell you, I don’t want La Ciega in the house anymore. You hear me?”
Quiteria’s voice shakes a little, “Well I can’t just go and slam the door on a poor, blind beggar girl, Bernardo! I can’t do that to a dear old friend!”

Bernardo leans closer to her, his eyes narrowed, “Do you ever ask yourself, Quiteria, why La Ciega is telling you all of this to begin with? Don’t you wonder why she comes here and tells you such indecent, obscene, and wildly outlandish tales? What is she getting at with all this?”

Bernardo leaves for the soap factory and Quiteria scrubs the kettle incessantly. By mid-morning, she hears pebbles on pebbles. What can I do? Quiteria thinks, I must let her in.

The hollows of María’s face are tinted green-grey. The sleeve of her dress is torn and she’s wrapped herself in a blanket.

“Are you alright, Ciega? O dear, come inside,” Quiteria says. She places her hand on María’s back. María shudders a little and then lets Quiteria lead her inside and into a chair. She grabs Quiteria’s forearm tightly.

“Was it real? A dream? Must have been a dream, because he wasn’t there in the morning--but perhaps he left as suddenly as he came in. It’s a possibility. It certainly a possibility. But what isn’t a possibility these days. He came in through the window, Quiteria. I could have sworn I’d latched it—I could have sworn. I heard the latch swing loose, metal scraping wood. I heard the shutters open, slowly, creeeeeaking. I lay as still as I could. Still as a corpse, but for the pounding of my heart. I heard him lean over the window frame and peer in. Heard his feet scrape the pebbles on the ground below. I heard him hoist himself up, heard him put one foot on the window frame. He paused a moment there. I couldn’t see him, but from the stillness I could tell he was there, crouching on the window sill, watching me. And then, with the softest thud, he landed lightly on my bedroom floor.”
María swivels a little to face her head on and Quiteria has the odd sensation the blind woman’s stare is piercing right through her.

“I was in my nightshift, Quiteria. Could have sworn I’d secured the latch. I prayed that God should send a wave of smoke to save me like the night before. I prayed that God should vanish the demons like the night before. I prayed and prayed, Quiteria. I really prayed. But no smoke came. Just a slight stirring in the air as the man leapt closer to my bed. And the stirring ran through my blankets and about my calves and my nightshift flutter slightly against my bare legs. I was all goose skin. The night air he brought in was so cold. But the warmth of his body subsumed it all as he crept into my bed. I began to sweat and swelter under his heat, the air, too thick to breathe, or perhaps it was his breath hanging over my face, my neck.” Quiteria notices that she’s been holding her breath. “And it could have been a dream, but he stayed right there all night, his weight bearing down on top of me. And he uttered not a word but he came to know me…carnally.” María’s green-green has turned flush pink and her mouth, a waning moon.

“I awoke the next day, bed soaked through with sweat. And he was gone. The window: closed again. And it could have been a dream, it could have all been a dream. It’s possible.”

María clutches at Quiteria’s arm again. “Tell me, tell me: was it real or just a dream? Tell me Quiteria! Did I latch the window? Did I? Who’s to blame? Is there blame to be had?” Her breathing has accelerated. She’s practically gasping for air now. Quiteria sits very still as if bound to herself.

“Answer me!” María digs her fingers deeper into Quiteria’s flesh. She’s screaming now, throwing her head back and wailing. No tears, just dry sobs.
“Wh-what can I say to all of this, María? Why are you telling me all this anyway?”

“I don’t know!” Wails La Ciega and she staggers out.

Scene 8 – The Growing Gut
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
June 28th, 1675

In the peak of the June afternoon heat, Quiteria starts to sweat. Certain topics are, even for Quiteria, hard to discuss before a courtroom full of stately old men. *Delicate matters are best kept in the hands of delicate people,* Quiteria says to her women friends. The only delicate item in the courtroom, she thinks, is the new hemming she’s sewn onto her skirt.

“It was after said incident with the man through the window that La Ciega’s…gut area began to grow. She had been complaining of pain there ever since the incident with the man through the window and the carnal act and all the confusion that came out of it. Her belly grew and grew and grew. My sister and I and all of our female friends couldn’t help but notice the drastic change in her appearance. And we all said to her on several occasions,

‘María, if we didn’t know you better, we would say you were pregnant—that you were within days of giving birth.’ My sister, whose been a mother many times over said to her, ‘The big, round gut, the bags under your eyes. Do you know what they call all those blotches on your cheeks, your forehead, your upper lip? The mask of pregnancy. I had it, too, each time I was pregnant. It goes away after you’ve finished nursing.’”
The gentlemen of the court are unsettlingly quiet. Quiteria quickly moves on to recount how on one occasion, while La Ciega was fasting, the demons threw a large melon through her window just to tempt her.

Scene 9 - The Candlestick
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
September 11th, 1675—September 3rd, 1675—July 8th, 1675—September 2nd, 1675

Only Quiteria and Bernardo mention María’s swollen belly in their testimonies—each only once and very briefly. Practically everyone, however, gives an account of the candlestick incident.

Even Lucía Ruiz, whose testimony hardly fills a page, mentions the incident before the court.

“It was about three years ago, more or less. My sister and I were by the stove. And La Ciega kept calling to me from my sister’s room. But, of course, being deaf, I didn’t hear. She kept calling and calling, so Ana got up and motioned that I follow her. So, I took a light and we went to the bedroom of La Ciega. We saw her there, between the bed and the wall and she had a candlestick of wood like between her legs and her feet up in the air. My sister took it out and brought La Ciega to the stove. I didn’t hear what she said. Nor did I see the candlestick after it was removed nor exactly in which part of her body she had it. Nor did I see if she had blood nor if she was left hurt. Because of my deafness, I didn’t understand any of it. And it is my sister really who had cared for La Ciega.”
The Inquisitor asks Lucía a few more questions. To each of which she replies, “I did not hear any of what you just said.” No one quite knows what to say or what to listen for, so the Inquisitor ends hearing early.

_And his mercy, seeing that this witness is not fit to be examined with respect to her severe deafness and due to the paralysis that she suffers, be dismissed her from court._

Ana Ruíz mentions the candlestick incident early on in her testimony.

The Inquisitor asks her, “In the many years that La Ciega has lived in your house, have you heard or seen anything that wouldn’t be considered natural, that would be, say, suspicious in the eyes of our sacred faith or extraordinary from the ways of nature?”

“One night, about three years ago it must have been, we were all by the stove—me, my sister, Lucía, and La Ciega. She got up and went into my bedroom. After a while she started calling, ‘Señora! Señora!’ and since my sister is deaf and didn’t hear, I went into the bedroom. Lucía followed with a light in her hands. I went to her, La Ciega, where she was: behind the bed, between the bed and a wall, feet in the air, head down on the floor and completely uncovered her secret flesh. And between her legs, she had a candlestick—a wooden one. It must have been a yard and a half long. And she supported her weight on the floor with one foot so that she could have it there. And the shaft of the candlestick, where one usually attaches the oil lamp, had a circumference bigger than a Segovian dollar coin. Because, when I arrived, the shaft was plugged up in her generative member and the foot was up against the wall, I asked, ‘What is this?!’ And she responded, ‘I don’t know.’”

The Inquisitor interrupts, “So the shaft of the candlestick was inside that vessel?”
“I didn’t even see the vessel of La Ciega nor if the candlestick was inside of her. What I did was to lift her up and take the candlestick away from her. I noticed that the point of it was wet and humid, not from blood. The humidity on the shaft was only as deep as a dollar coin, so it seemed only the point had gotten wet. And after all this was done, La Ciega was whimpering. I asked her, “Why are you whimpering? Does it hurt in that...in that part?” And she said, “Yes, it hurts, where you know it to hurt,” which lead me to understand that indeed I knew; I had seen it. Later, she led me to believe that she had been tied to the leg of the bed for this incident but I didn’t see her tied nor any instrument of attachment. And I noticed that the next day she didn’t walk like a person that in this part of her had suffered a wound, which struck my sister and I as off-putting, as we had heard her say that she had spirits. We doubted if it was they, the demons, that had left her like that. And now, I am inclined believe the worst.”

Luísa Sanchez was not present three years earlier to witness the candlestick incident, but remembers the story vividly, quite graphically. What she cannot recall is how she heard it originally. Was it from her sister, Quiteria? Or La Ciega herself?

“One night, in her private parts,” Luísa interrupts herself, “you know, now that I think of it, I recall having heard this from La Ciega herself. Anyways, that night, in her private parts, the demons shoved a candlestick. And they had her hung all night long from the ceiling of her bedroom and in the morning, Lucía and Ana Ruiz came in and they un-hung her. But she was so badly damaged that she went to her confessor that day with blood running down her legs.”
Friar Montero recounts the candlestick incident the second time he testifies in María’s case.

“The devil delivered many temptations to her chastity. One night, he beat her fiercely. He put her feet up in the air and in her generative member, he shoved a candlestick made of wood. And she suffered a great part of the night—suffered terrible pains until Ana Ruíz came. Exerting a mighty force, Ana finally pulled it out of her,” he shook his head and, trailing off a little, concludes, “And La Ciega was left most deeply pained.”

Scene 10 – The Friar’s Sentence
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
May 28th, 1678

It’s a Saturday morning in late May when the court reads Friar Montero his sentence. He’s been held cloistered in a convent in Toledo as his trial proceedings have come to a head. He hasn’t seen María since the last time she confessed to him. It was the day she was arrested, August 18th, 1675. He wonders if she is still being held in the secret prisons of the Inquisition for the duration of his proceedings. If so, she would be coming on three years now in what he imagines is a tiny cell.

We do rule, attending to the testimonies and merits of these proceedings that, by right of his culpability, came against Friar Francisco Montero. If we had followed only the rigor of the law, we might have condemned him with grand and grave punishments. However, we wanted to act moderately, with equity and mercy, for certain reasons that moved us.

And so, in this court chamber, before the Ministers of the Secret and eight religious confessors, we read read him our sentencing:
He should be gravely reprehended, and it should be advertised that he is suspended from his post as confessor—to both men and women—for six years and banished for four from this city of Toledo, the villages of Madrid, Colmenar de Oreja, and Chinchón with a radius of eight leagues.

Perhaps María has already set out to find a new home in banishment. Perhaps she has traveled much further away by this point. The Friar wonders where she’s been, who she’s met, what she’s seen. Perhaps she’s made it to Ávila or Seville or maybe she’s been to the sea. Or, perhaps in her wanderings, she has stayed close to the court-mandated radius, hoping to run into someone familiar, looking for company there on the outskirts.
In this chapter, we examine the sexual and the demonic as corporeal modes that collide within María’s body and in the early-modern world around her. Its formal structure differs from that of the first two chapters because I do most of the emplotment work in the analytic section, rather than in the narrative scenes. As I studied how witnesses discussed sex and the devil in their testimonies, I noticed a certain shift in their tones and rhetorics. The witnesses’ accounts were sparse and brief; they did not proffer much in the way of interpretation, synthesis, or opinion.

This struck me as noteworthy, given that the witnesses tended to venture their own extrapolative interpretations quite readily. The witnesses decisively claimed that María’s mystical persona—was feigned for material gain and that her disability was not totally legitimate. But when it came to discussing the Candlestick Incident, for example, none of the witnesses offered any explanation as to what happened or why. Ana Ruíz comes closest: “We doubted if it was they, the demons, that had left her like that. And now, I am inclined believe the worst.” Ana never elaborates on what she believes the worst to be. The other witnesses didn’t even go so far as to doubt María’s blaming the demons for the incident.

I wondered about the significance of these silences—what had gone unsaid and why. Whatever they were hiding or showing, I felt that these silences were an important part of the stories’ retellings, so I decided to preserve them in my own retelling. To this end, I presented much of the testimony in direct translation as it was recorded by the notary. Furthermore, I did not want to over-write these silences. Considering that many

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1 First testimony of Ana Ruíz
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 62r
of the stories touching on the demonic and the sexual were violent, violating, and potentially traumatic, I did not want to erase anyone’s experience or deprive them of their experience. I tried to let the people of Colmenar speak for themselves.

I have organized this chapter around four points of intersection between the sexual and the demonic that witnesses recounted in the trial:

1)  The Seventy-Seven Days
2)  The Incident of the Man through the Window
3)  The Swollen Gut
4)  The Candlestick Incident

While there are many possible narrative structures upon which we can emplot these points of information, I will with the relationship between María and Friar Montero.—it illuminates her rise as a mystic, her confession of fraud before the court, her experience with power, her motives and desires, her beliefs about herself, and her everyday life.

Their relationship, it seems, was quite close. She spent hours each day confessing to him and he, listening to her confessions. They spent a lot of time together in seclusion outside of church, even in his home. While María and the Friar deny these allegations, many of the villagers suspected that the intimacy of their relationship might have exceeded the bounds of a confessor/penitent relationship, that María should be careful, or that she might ‘leave the confessional with a son.’ Whatever the configuration of their relationship—platonic, sexually abusive, passionately romantic, or anything in between—it seems to bear heavily on María’s embodied experience of the sexual. We will begin by laying out, in broad terms, three possible configurations of this relationship: a spiritual friendship, a sexually-abusive relationship, or a love affair.
Although María Cotanilla directs and redirects the court’s attention to allegations of sexual predation against the Friar and to many hours she alone with him, she vehemently denies that anything sexual ever happened between them. In light of her ambivalent depiction of the Friar’s relationships, we have a dilemma: are we to take María’s explicit denial of sexual contact or are we to follow her suggestive gestures and look for it implicitly?

Contextualizing this relationship with historical scholarship on confessor/penitent relationships, we will see, proves difficult. In staking their arguments, the historians I invoke each emphasize certain trends over others. We will begin our study with Jodi Bilinkoff, who focuses on these relationships as profound and non-sexual “spiritual friendships.” Later, we will consider Stephen Haliczer’s seemingly opposition study devoted almost exclusively to confessor/penitent relationships that were sexually-involved. María and Friar Montero’s case would probably fall somewhere between these two polarities. It most likely would not serve as perfect example of pure spiritual friendship nor a passionate romance. So, as we proceed, we must try to weigh these two arguments against each other and remember that relationships most often do not epitomize any historical trend; rather, they are as dynamic and multivalent as the people that make them.

Bilinkoff paints for us a detailed picture of what this first possibility—of spiritual friendship—looked like. She observes how confessors and penitents in ambiguously intimate relationships often recounted them as purely “spiritual friendships.” Where they erred on the side of the romantic, she elaborates, it was often in light of a spiritual

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3 Ibid.
intimacy and not physical intimacy. Bilinkoff thus suggests for these relationships a more literal register of the term “soul mates.”

Certain themes thus emerge in the accounts of early modern religious women and their male confidants as they described intense, often long-lasting relationships. They remembered exchanging confidences, even secrets, soliciting the other’s advice or opinions before making a decision, and learning how to tell, just with a glance, what the other person was thinking. They expressed pleasure when their chosen partner was present and distress at separation. They cared for each other in sickness and in health, sometimes experiencing sympathetically the other’s bodily afflictions. In short, they interacted like many married couples. The only significant difference was the lack of sexual congress.

It is quite possible that María Cotanilla and Friar Montero spent all those intimate, private hours entwined in the sort of spiritual friendship Bilinkoff describes. However, in light of all that stood (and, to this day, still stands) to silence women from reporting sexual abuse and shame them for their sexuality, we cannot take for granted María’s claim that their relationship never took on a physical or sexual component. Thus, we find ourselves with three possibilities: First, that it is a non-sexual spiritual friendship, as María asserts before the court; second, that their relationship could have entailed some non-consensual sexual component, as Ana de Castillo’s testimony against Montero suggests; and third, that Cotanilla and Montero could have shared a consensual sexual relation.

In trying to make sense of María’s relationship with Friar Montero, we cannot ignore the multiple accusations of sexual predation levied against him. While the allegations vary in their degrees of specificity, severity, and substantiation, they all attach to him a level of sexual misconduct that demands investigation. These accusations lead

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 88
6 Ibid., 86
us to the second possible configuration of María’s relationship with the Friar: that it was sexually abusive.

In the very first testimony filed in Friar Montero’s case, Ana de Castillo, a congregant of the parish church, comes forth to accuse the Friar of sexually harassing her in church. While Ana’s testimony does not directly bear on María’s case, it does offer the most detailed and direct allegation against him. Though Ana tells the inquisitor that she knows of no other instance in which the Friar behaved in such a way towards a woman, María’s testimony, however, makes it seem as though wariness of the Friar’s sexual conduct pervades the female community; indeed, they frequently caution her of the dangers of spending time with him unsupervised. Further, that Ana herself was so reluctant to testify and kept silent those many months after the incident, serves as a poignant reminder that sexual harassment, especially from authority figures, often went (and to this day, still goes) unreported.

In his survey of the Spanish Inquisition’s many solicitation cases, Haliczer not only sheds light on the vast incidence of sexual harassment of female penitents by their confessors, but also underscores the gaping disparity between abuses perpetrated and abuses officially reported. The Inquisition archives account for so few of these cases, he explains, because that tribunal only exercised jurisdiction over abuses perpetrated during the act confession. This limited scope of concern, he elaborates, discouraged many women from reporting abuses:

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7 First testimony of Ana de Castillo
   AHN, Inq., August 19, 1674, leg. 114, exp. 112, f. 2
8 Testimony of María Cotanilla
   AHN, Inq., December 4, 1674, leg. 114, exp. 112, f. 10r-12r
9 Stephen Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned (Oxford University Press on Demand, 1996), 167.
Verbal affronts, like the ones Ana de Castillo reported were, according to court records, the most common form of harassment.
An exclusive concern with the misuse of the sacrament of penance meant that most women who were abused by priests were left to go it alone in an ecclesiastical court system that was frequently more concerned with avoiding scandal and protecting the reputation of the ecclesiastical estate than it was with providing relief for the victims of sexual crimes.\textsuperscript{10}

We cannot assume that every woman who cautioned María was herself abused by the Friar. I tried to capture in Scene 2 how María’s mention of these warnings went largely uncorroborated, that these accusations are left loose ends. Parsing through the testimonies, as notary, Diego Ximenez de Soto did, it is hard to know what to make of the absence of citation and corroboration in María’s claims. Was María spreading rumors to defame the Friar or was she protecting the anonymity of women who had given these warnings from a place of experience? Could the silences around these accusations speak to the fear and gravity that lurks behind them?

María does directly source Antonio Bustos’s accusatory warning against Friar Montero, that should be careful confessing to him or she will wind up with a son.\textsuperscript{11} Antonio, when he is finally called in to testify, adamantly denies that the exchange ever took place.\textsuperscript{12} The Inquisition did wait two years to investigate the alleged allegation and in this hiatus, it is possible that Antonio may have forgotten the conversation. It could be that he never said such a thing to her at all. Or perhaps he did say it, but denied it to avoid further enmeshment in the Inquisition proceedings.

It is very possible that María did receive these warnings from Antonio and the several unnamed village women—likely too, that the cautioners should retract them or leave them unsubstantiated. Haliczer notes that skepticism of clergymen and their sexual

\textsuperscript{10} Haliczer, \textit{Sexuality in the Confessional}, 119

\textsuperscript{11} Testimony of María Cotanilla

\textsuperscript{12} First testimony of Antonio Bustos

AHN, Inq., December 4, 1674, leg. 114, exp. 112, f. 10r-12r

AHN, Inq., February 4, 1678, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 29
conduct was rampant in this Counter-Reformation moment: “Members of the tight-knit village communities that made up most of Spain were well aware that many, if not most, priests lived in sin, routinely violating the rule of celibacy.” It is possible that those who had warned against the Friar’s sexual predation would not stand by their allegations in court, as they may have been entrenched in a feeling, an intuition, an informed discourse of fear, rather than a concrete event or piece of evidence. These apprehensions of the sexual misconduct of clergy crystallized around the confessional. According to Haliczer:

The potential danger to chastity of the excessive familiarity that might arise between confessor and penitent in the course of frequent confession was a cause of grave concern to Pérez de Valdivia, who warned that frequent confession inevitably brought the female penitent into contact with men and that the confessional does not change instinct since ‘confessors are men after all, however saintly they may be.’

These potential for abuse was built into the power structure of the confessor/penitent relationship. Female penitents were, Haliczer observes, expected to “surrender” themselves entirely to their spiritual guides, their confessors. This power imbalance may have been aggravated by María’s precarious financial situation and her lack of a familial social network. Reliance on the community and church’s support might have discouraged someone like María from making waves by speaking out against a sexual abuse. Further, in early-modern courts, it was often the families of women, eager to protect their loved ones and their honor, who held perpetrators accountable for sexual harassment and rape. As Haliczer notes, it was very difficult and thus rather rare for women to “go it alone” in the court system seeking justice for sexual abuse.

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13 Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 3
14 Ibid., 112
15 Ibid., 114
17 Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 119
Galicia, where sexual norms were perhaps more flexible, Posak cites an incident in which a single woman reports her rape experience before the court to explain her unwed pregnancy. Still, a woman in María’s position may have been or appeared to be easily silenced and thus, an easy target for sexual abuse.

Using data from 223 solicitation cases, Haliczer draws up an archetypal profile of “the typical victim of solicitation.” Given that these cases spanned a period of almost three-hundred years and given the relatively small sample size, we cannot extrapolate anything about María’s case from this data. We can, however, use it to understand the trends around these cases and perhaps try to understand how María’s might be situated in relation to them. Given that these cases spanned a period of almost three-hundred years and given the relatively small sample size, we cannot extrapolate anything about María’s case from this data. We can, however, use it to understand the trends around these cases and perhaps try to understand how María’s might be situated in relation to them. Haliczer notes that 50% of women solicited were single; that the average age at the time of the incident was 21 years and the average age at the time of their deposition before the court, 27 years; and that the vast majority were from the lower or lower middle classes. From this data, we can observe that Priests tended to target women who fell under similar social categories as María—single, fairly young, and of the lower classes.

Further, the allegation levied against Friar Montero raise serious doubts about his character and his part in this history. His abhorrent treatment of Ana de Castillo and the

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18 Poska, Women and Authority, 94
19 Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 112
20 Ibid., 4
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 109
23 Ibid., 106
24 Ibid., 105
female villagers’ misgivings instruct us to be wary of his underlying intentions and behaviors, especially with regards to women. Further, they subvert his claims to innocence. For, with these portrayals of Friar Montero as a predator before us, how are we to make sense of his self-presentation as the victim duped in María’s elaborate scheme.

In the Friar’s description of his relationship with María before the court, he casts her as the exploiter and himself as the exploited. He uses language that masculinizes María and characterizes himself in a more traditionally feminized role: “In terms of natural capabilities to understand, she had always conceptualized and understood better than a woman.” Crediting her with a latent, keen intellect, the Friar accords María’s character the ability to scheme, deceive, and even outwit a man. In doing so, the Friar colors himself as innocent, overly-trusting, vulnerable in his selfless propensity to nurture, and dupable. Because of these attributes, he suggests, he was deceived by María’s feigned sanctity, promulgated her gifts, and wrote her biography. These traits that the Friar assigns himself are the same ones that orbited early-modern discussions of women’s susceptibility to deception by false revelations. Keitt explains:

> [W]omen were thought to be especially prone to false revelations because of their presumed suggestibility…contemporary medical theory rendered them more liable to being deceived by vivid sense perceptions. Moreover, they were more likely to confuse psychological disorders with genuine spiritual gifts.

It was these very same ‘feminine’ vulnerabilities, the church held, that incited the need for male confessors to direct the spiritual lives of women. Ironically, rather than exculpating himself as the victim, he exposes himself as failing to provide the firm,
rational male guidance expected of confessors with female penitents. Still, a humble failure to measure up to expectations of male religious authorities would have been less incriminating than an elaborate and cunning fraud, an exploitation of religious belief for personal gain.

While María claims authorship of the whole scheme, she does try to claim this same exculpation feminine fallibility. She goes further to blame Friar Montero for not exacting his rational male over her feminine propensity towards excess, her vulnerability to her own vices:

Why did he never reprimand me? Why did he never grab me by the wrist, yank me back and say, 'What is all this madness?' Why did he let me keep running with all these ideas all these ideas run wild?²⁷

Although we never get to observe their interaction, when we read their testimonies against each other, we get a glimpse of the complexity of their relationship. The power dynamics do not emerge as clearly defined as we might have expected. Neither do the gender roles. It is rather difficult to trace the exact evolution of their respective rhetoric around each other, but it does change over the course of the trial. While in the excerpt above, María blames the Friar, she frequently emphasizes his good intentions, that he earnestly believed in her feigned spiritual persona. Over the course of his November, the Friar both purports total ignorance²⁸ and claims that he documented her visions because he suspected that they were fabricated and that the Inquisition might someday appreciate their record.²⁹ In all the power configurations that

²⁷ Testimony of María Cotanilla
   AHN, Inq., December 11, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 14r
²⁸ Hearing of Friar Montero
   AHN, Inq., November 6, 1677, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 105r
²⁹ Ibid., f. 104
María and the Friar propose as they cast and recast their relationship before the court, María emerges as the more intelligent, influential, and powerful of the two.

If we are to make room for unexpected possibilities, we must examine what their relationship might have looked like if it was María, and not Friar, whom the power imbalance favored. Female penitents did find subtle ways of exerting their influence over their male confessors and even manipulating them to their own ends. Bilinkoff notes that laywomen, who like María lacked “institutional support and formal status as religious were especially vulnerable to accusations of fraud, heresy, demonic possession, and the like, and thus in particular need of the authorization and protection a male clergyman could provide.”

There is a fair amount of scholarship that examines how these women often selected a confessor strategically and took a heavy hand in shaping the form this confessor support took. Keitt suggests that:

[T]hose under the guidance of a spiritual director were not as powerless as we might imagine…women often asserted a remarkable degree of self-assertion in relations with their confessors.

He cites an example in which female mystic, María de la Encarnación, left her confessor because he “had a reputation for being overly strict with his hijas de confesión, or “confessional daughters.”

Teresa of Ávila, perhaps the most well-known and loved female mystic, was famously deft at navigating, on the one hand, the expectation to surrender to her male confessor and, on the other hand, her confidence in her own spiritual guidance over

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30 Bilinkoff, Related Lives, 78
31 Keitt, Inventing the Sacred, 105
32 Ibid.
their inefficiency. Gillian Ahlgren observes that:

...Teresa provided her readers with the inner resources to discern their own spiritual progress—self-knowledge and an ability to focus on the inner spiritual peace that the mystical experience should provide—so they would not have to depend too heavily on their confessors for reinforcement.

Teresa of Ávila even advocated that penitents should be able to seek the counsel of multiple spiritual directors, which would almost inevitably introduce conflicts, leaving the penitent to choose the advice that most resonated with her own opinion. Thus, there was a strong tradition of spiritually-gifted women critiquing, judging, filtering their confessor’s influence and even dismissing it altogether in search of one more suited to her needs.

Haliczer puts it another way: women with spiritual aspiration sometimes used sex to “cement the support of male disciples.” He recounts an anecdote in which Isabel Riera, an aspiring spiritual woman, in the 1680s, “[d]etermined to add the influential Augustinian Fray Pedro Benimelis to her list of conquests...threw her arms around him and touched his face, shoulder, and habit, saying that God had ordained it.” Haliczer follows that, “in the ensuing months, Benimelis became Riera’s most devoted disciple, burning incense in front of a portrait of her.” Haliczer even proposes an unexpected corollary that, once a spiritual woman had her dominion cemented these disciples, she

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could exploit them to her own sexual ends. He cites the case of Gertrudis Tosca, a ‘spiritual mother’ from Valencia, who took from her large cult following three priests to be her lovers, claiming that it was necessary for the advancement of her spiritual perfection.\(^\text{36}\)

This turn of women seeking sexual relationships should not be excluded from the set of possibilities in María’s case. With her lack of dowry and her relatively advanced age for a new bride (a whopping twenty-eight years), María would have been, in her moment, unlikely ever to marry. Until the fifteenth-century, women in this situation could arrange for themselves an *amancebamiento*, a consensual but informal union that was not only sexual, but also often involved cohabitation with a man.\(^\text{37}\) It was not uncommon for these arrangements to take the form of what scholars call “concubinages” between an unwed female and a male priest. With the Counter-Reformation’s crackdown on priestly celibacy, especially with the diocesan synod of 1622\(^\text{38}\) that called for the immediate termination of all concubinages, these arrangements became more difficult to sustain—difficult, although not impossible. Indeed, the fact that Friar Montero had his own private quarters may have been the key factor in facilitating of a sexual affair—whether consensual or non-consensual.\(^\text{39}\) The Counter-Reformation’s revamped enforcement of proscriptions against sex outside of marriage, as well as unconventional sexual and domestic partnerships, made it difficult, even dangerous, for many women to have any sort of sexual life at all. While we must not

\(^{\text{36}}\) Ibid., 142
\(^{\text{37}}\) Poska, *Women and Authority*, 76.
\(^{\text{38}}\) Poska, *Women and Authority*, 84
\(^{\text{39}}\) Haliczker, *Sexuality in the Confessional*, 172

“It was also possible for clerics to make use of their own domicile or lodging as a place of assignations.”
over-determine María’s sexual needs and desires, we can and should take a moment to imagine the frustration that many women in her situation might have felt.

Desire and frustration aside, a woman in María’s situation would have stood to gain significantly from a sexual or romantic engagement with the Friar. With his position of power and authority, he possessed much of what she needed: financial support and an avenue to spiritual credibility. Many solicitation cases exposed the exchange of money or gifts for sex between women in financial duress and priests. María, who was in persistent financial need, received at least some financial aid from the Friar; the inventory of her assets reveals that she held a sum he had loaned her. But again, we cannot draw any firm conclusions from this; we can only recognize that it was not uncommon for women who struggled financially to engage in these sexual exchanges to improve their situation.

There is, of course, also the possibility that María Cotanilla and Friar Montero were in love. We do not have much evidence to confirm or debunk this possibility, but it does bear heavily on how we read the rest of the story. Female penitents and their male confessors really did fall in love; “soul mates” became soul mates. Haliczer chronicles several examples of these love stories all with tragic endings; he is, after all, studying solicitation cases brought before the Inquisition. In one such case a servant, Margerita Baretta, and her confessor were exposed in their love affair when a co-worker of Margerita’s noticed that she had started dressing up before going to confessional. Not unlike María and Friar Montero, the two were known to spend a lot of time together both inside and outside of church. On many occasions—at least twenty, they said—

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40 Ibid., 134
41 Inventory Report by Gabriel Robreño y Mesonero
   AHN, Inq., August 25, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, s.f
42 Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 138-9
Margerita and her confessor went to his house to make love.\textsuperscript{43} On one of these escapades, Margerita was impregnated and she abandoned the baby at a foundling hospital.\textsuperscript{44} Considering Bilinkoff’s writing on the intimacy that often formed in these relationships, it is not difficult to imagine that these romances were fairly common. Haliczer asserts that in the cases he studied, 39% of the penitents testified that the sexual relations between her and her confessor were consensual.

The nature of the relationship between María Cotanilla and Friar Montero bears heavily on how we read the stories they each tell in court. If the Friar coerced María into an abusive sexual relationship, is it more likely that he also coerced her into participating in a scheme of his devising? Bilinkoff writes that, just as female mystics needed confessors, so too, confessors eagerly sought out these spiritual women.\textsuperscript{45} Confessors, Bilinkoff writes, “developed sensitive antennae” for women with spiritual gifts, for it was widely held that, “[b]eing a conduit of divine messages and recipient of divine graces was the prerogative of women, and the best a man could hope for was a vicarious experience through close contact with a charismatic woman.”\textsuperscript{46} Bilinkoff devotes a chapter to study how confessors often took an authorial role in shaping the personae and life story of their spiritual charges. In this creative license, we see a potential for a confessor to corrupt the story, to commandeer the spiritual aspirations of a female penitent. Indeed, when the notary reads María excerpts from the book of her life, she testifies that certain sections were entirely the Friar’s invention.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Bilinkoff, \textit{Related Lives}, 79
\textsuperscript{46} Bilinkoff, \textit{Related Lives}, 80
\textsuperscript{47} Hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., December 11, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 14r
If they shared a true love or what Bilinkoff calls a true “spiritual friendship,” could they have been collaborators in constructing María’s mystical persona? Did they spend their many hours alone together scheming together, plotting María’s next vision, her next victim? Perhaps they both believed that María was a genuine mystic and shared excitement in her spiritual aspirations. As they knew the Inquisition would come after them, might they have prepared a narrative to tell the court? Could one of them have betrayed a true love or true spiritual friendship with the prospect of power or, later, in court, under the pressure of Inquisition? Once again, we find a piece of the trial that signals, but does not address, vast emotional complexities and corporal experiences. While we have no way of asking María or the Friar what the inquisitor did not, I argue that we can use our four points of inquiry to probe these unexplored histories.

1) The Seventy-Seven Days

María’s demonic visions and possessions come to a head during her seventy-seven days of “temptation to her chastity.” This linkage between the demonic and sexual temptation was, and still is, commonplace. James Amelang and Beatriz Moncó Rebollo, in a compilation of works on the devil in the early-modern imagination, both foreground anxieties around the devil’s propensity to implant sexual fantasies, particularly in the minds of youth and women. Amelang writes that the devil was thought to present himself

…as a tempter, or what we could call, a fomenter of fantasy. It’s no surprise that this should include sexual fantasy and that it found expression not only in the
collective context of the scenes of the Sabbat, but also in the most individualized
mischiefs of the demons, both incubus and succubus.\textsuperscript{48}
Rebollo elaborates on this tendency towards personalization of demonic sexual fantasy.
She appreciates how in picturing the devil, many people found a staging ground for
unfettered imaginative transgression. There are, she writes, “as many kinds of [devils] as
there there are types of nuns.”\textsuperscript{49} While I do not intend to psychoanalyze María, it is hard
to ignore how her visions of the devil and of heaven seem to inscribe her own
predicament. For example, in her vision of the mysterious demon man that approaches
her after church, we not only see María wooed and fawned over, but we also see her
receive a marriage proposal, which, as we have discussed would probably never happen
for María.\textsuperscript{50} We see these imaginations of impossible realities for María reflected in her
experiences in heaven, when God grants her lifelong wish to read.\textsuperscript{51}
Despite the colorful potential for reading imagination and individuality into these
demonic episodes, demonic possession was a common claim on the part of many female
mystics; it was so pervasive that it almost seems a mystic’s rite of passage. As Rebollo
points out, experiences like María’s manifested in many different women in strikingly
similar ways: physical torment, painful beatings, convulsions, spasms, severe illness,
paralysis, shivering, intense bouts of weeping, shouts and shrieks, etc.\textsuperscript{52}
Of all the visions and ecstatic experiences that María annuls in her confession,
she sustains her claim of demonic visitations and possessions throughout. While it might

\textsuperscript{48} James S. Amelang, "Durmiendo con el Enemigo: El Diablo en los Sueños" In El Diablo en la Edad
Moderena, edited by María Tausiet and James S. Amelang (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2004), 351.
\textsuperscript{49} Beatriz Moncó Rebollo, "Demonios y Mujeres: Historia de una Transgresión" In El Diablo en la Edad
Moderena, edited by María Tausiet and James S. Amelang (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2004), 207
\textsuperscript{50} First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30
\textsuperscript{51} First testimony of Luísa Sanchez
AHN, Inq., July 8, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 35v
\textsuperscript{52} Rebollo, “Demonios y Mujeres,” 196
seem that demonic possession would work as a tally against her, demonic encounters were considered by the Inquisition to be considerably less threatening than claims of false sanctity. For unlike María’s claim to ferry souls out of eternal damnation, claims of demonic possession did not, Rebollo notes, break from the orthodoxy of the period, that: “God permits Satan to possess human bodies as confirmation of the faith and for the manifestation of virtue, among other reasons.”53 Amelang also underscores the prevalence of the belief the demons often tempted and possessed the virtuous and good, so such an affiliation with the devil did not render a person “demonic.”54

In fact, demonic possession was considered valid grounds for exculpating a person from their transgressions, for when the devil occupied a person’s body, they were considered to be just that—a body. It was understood that their personhood and thus, their volition, was entirely dominated by Satan.55 Ana Ruíz pinpoints a certain loophole in this doctrine, one that she notices María exploit in her identification with demonic possession:

When I would reprimand her for some bad deed she had done, she would look at me and say, ‘O Ana, I did no such thing…” by which she meant to say that the evil or unvirtuous deed was perpetrated by the spirits that she said to have inside of her. It was the spirits, and not her, that danced and did the bad deeds, but, when she was virtuous, it was she herself that had done it.56

María Cotanilla was not the only person to maneuver her demonic possession as a scapegoat for sinful behaviors and to claim only virtuous deeds as her own. While Ana sees through this smoke screen, the Inquisition was, for a long time, at a loss in this grey area. These questions of demonic possession and human agency echo in many different

53 Ibid., 207
54 Amelang, “Durmiendo con el Enemigo,” 351
55 Rebollo, “Demonios y Mujeres,” 195
56 First testimony of Ana Ruíz
 AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 64
cases of false sanctity. For, Keitt writes, “prophesy, visions, spiritual raptures and divine revelations—could be simulated by the devil”\textsuperscript{57} and thus, any incriminating behaviors that fell under these category could be pawned off as his perpetration. The defendant often manipulated the trial such that, as Keitt puts it, “the devil was being tried as an accomplice in absentia” and they, the victims and informants.\textsuperscript{58} Eventually, the Inquisition had to invent a new charge for this sort of fraud: feigning diabolism.\textsuperscript{59}

This is not to exclude the possibility of María’s experience of demonic possession. It is only to suggest that claims might have strengthened her case, rendering her a victim subject to the devil’s clutches, rather than a perpetrator herself. As Amelang notes, sexual dreams and fantasies of the devil were not uncommon for the early-modern sleeper, so this could very well be María’s experience.

Whether or not María’s dreams and visions were theaters in which María staged her desires and imaginative transgressions, we also have no way of knowing. I argue that it would be obtuse to chalk all of María’s demonic encounters up to experiments in sexual imagination. While we have examined some of the reasons she may have invented her fraught relationship with the devil, it was by no means a purely fanciful affair. As evidenced in the shoe incident, María’s bore the brunt of these demonic possessions in beatings and flagellations. It was an embodied reality for her, whether she truly felt herself possessed, or if she was presenting herself as such. And if the latter, I suggest, she may have feigned these sinister affairs to masquerade other dark encounters. As we continue our examination, we will see how these dark encounters and the rhetorical

\textsuperscript{57} Keitt, \textit{Inventing the Sacred}, 30
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 175
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 172
power of demonic possession might emplot in different permutations with the other three points of inquiry, into María and the Friar’s relationship, and onto María’s body.

2) The Incident of the Man through the Window

There is one nighttime encounter that stands out entirely from the others. In recounting it, María makes no mention of the devil nor does she cite it as a mystical visitation. María seems certain that the trespass of this unnamed figure into her bedroom and the “carnal act” he perpetrates were not a mystical vision. She tells Quiteria that she cannot, however, determine if it was a dream or reality.\(^60\)

Amelang locates this question of reality versus dream/imagination as “one of most fecund debates of the Modern Age.”\(^61\) He cites a case in which a doctor observed a suspected witch as she dreamed of carnal pleasures with the devil in order to verify that her body was motionless and not physically engaged in the act.\(^62\) This dream vs. reality ambiguity surrounding the man in the window intensifies the already disconcerting and upsetting nature of the sexual act. María does not call this “carnal act” a rape nor a violation, nor does she admit to consenting or participating willfully. So, while we are unsure if this sexual act was violating and traumatic or, on the other hand, perhaps even pleasurable, we also do not know whether the experience took place in María’s body or in her dream state.

The stakes in this piece of the puzzle, are high. Whether the event took place in “reality,” as María calls it, or in the dream world, her embodied experience would be very different if she was assaulted (in either realm) versus if she had a pleasurable sexual

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\(^60\) First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30v


\(^62\) Amelang, “Durmiendo con el Enemigo,” 345
experience (in either realm). However, if the sexual act took place in María’s “reality,” then we are left with a loose thread: who was the man in the window? Was it a passerby? A villager? A priest? The Friar? If this sexual experience of María’s did occur in the physical realm of her body, then perhaps this incident affects how we read Quiteria’s mention of María’s swollen gut.

3) The Swollen Gut

Quiteria does not retell verbatim María’s account of the incident with the man through the window, so we cannot know the exact nature of the “carnal act” she experienced that night. If it was physically penetrative vaginal intercourse, then we know for sure that María had sex at least once in her life and thus, it is possible that her swollen gut was a pregnant belly. Although the timeline of these events is quite nebulous, both Quiteria and Bernardo associate the incident of the man in the window with María’s ensuing swollen belly. Quiteria links them in the same rambling sentence:

Said La Ciega recounted that one night she had dreamed that a man had entered through her window and, as she was laying in bed, he cohabited with her having a carnal act and when she awoke, she didn’t see that man and she was left confused and doubtful if it was reality and true or a dream and following, the usual blame wasn’t there and with this was most of her confusion and, more, seeming that in the gut she grew, it followed that some of her friends told her many times Ciego if we didn’t know you, we would say you were pregnant and within days of giving birth... 63

While this linkage seems pretty firm in Quiteria’s mind, it is important to note that in the reality of many female mystics, physical sexual intercourse was not considered requisite for an embodied pregnancy. Andrew Keitt writes:

Mystical pregnancy was a familiar trope in the writings of women visionaries. Their spiritual autobiographies tell of swellings and contortions that these

63 Ibid.
women, in their intense identification with the Virgin Mary, interpreted as sympathetic pregnancy.\textsuperscript{64}

These swellings and mystical pregnancies were not only inspired by the sympathy for the Virgin; they were often understood to be perpetrations of the devil. Keitt notes that “numerous accounts of women being impregnated by the devil can be found in the demonological literature of the period,” and further, that this possibility piqued fears about the potential spawn that could be born from such a pregnancy.\textsuperscript{65} It is possible that María’s pregnancy was a response to a perceived sexual encounter with the devil. However, given her tendency to blame the devil in fraught or incriminating circumstances, we have to wonder why she didn’t invoke his name in this case. Perhaps she was, as Keitt mentioned, afraid that the spawn growing inside of her might render her a pariah.

It is also quite possible that María’s swollen gut was simply a swollen gut. Wind, colic, and dropsy, the accumulation of fluid,\textsuperscript{66} all resulted in swollen bellies and were common ailments for early modern women. Dropsy was, Baernstein and Christopoulos write, commonly mistaken for pregnancy as their symptoms—a growing belly, lethargy, fever, etc.—were markedly similar. They take up as a case study, an Italian 13-year-old, Costanza Colanna, whose 8-month struggle with a confidently diagnosed case of ‘dropsy’ ended in childbirth.\textsuperscript{67} This case exemplifies just how opaque the female body was even to medical practitioners in the early-modern period. Further, the young woman’s insistence that she did not know she was pregnant opens up a whole bastion of questions about

\begin{footnotes}
\item[64] Keitt, Inventing the Sacred, 173
\item[65] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
how women engaged with the opacity of their own bodies. How and when did they use the ambiguities of their bodies to their advantage?

Could María have relied on the villagers’ acceptance of female body’s illegibility to deflect investigation into her growing belly? Is this perhaps why Quiteria and Bernardo are the only two witnesses that mention María’s swollen belly? In her examination of secret births and infanticide in early-modern England, Laura Gowing elaborates on how communities interacted with the ambiguous signs of pregnancy. She writes, “Nothing was certain until a child was born: if some neighbours watched a woman who looked pregnant, many other ignored her or denied knowledge of her situation.” 68 Still, the scant mention of this seemingly blatant change in María’s body (Quiteria says she looked “within days of giving birth”) is puzzling and we will parse it further later on.69

4) The Candlestick Incident

It is perhaps in the candlestick incident, our fourth point of inquiry, that we find a possible explanation for the curious silence on the matter of María’s belly. Haliczer includes the candlestick and another incident involving pebbles in his book on female mystics in Golden Age Spain. He curates these instances of María’s life alongside anecdotes from several other female mystics in a section on sexual frustration and the self-loathing therein. Specifically, he uses it to exemplify the masturbatory tendencies into which this erotic longing was manifest:

Even though she blamed the devil for her situation, it is obvious that María had been using the candlestick as a dildo while masturbating…on another evening, when Ana entered the stable to check on the stock, she found María propped up

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68 Gowing, “Secret Births,” 90
69 First Testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30v
against the wall with her private parts exposed, this time making use of three small stones to help her masturbate.70

His language here, I feel, is a bit deterministic. It should be noted that Ana Ruíz testifies that the candlestick in question was about a yard and half long.71 Which makes me wonder: is it obvious that a woman would use a four and a half-foot long candlestick as a dildo? Sherry Velasco’s *Lesbians in Early Modern Spain* includes several accounts of women describing their dildos, none of which resembles this design in the slightest. One fourteenth-century text recommends the employment of a “dildo, which is made of soft leather and cotton and formed in the shape of a penis: they insert this into their vagina until their desire is satisfied.”72 It would make sense that María would not own a proper, leather dildo—and, we know, no leather dildo is mentioned in the court’s inventory of her assets. So, if María were to use a dildo, it would most likely be a makeshift construction. However, I find it hard to believe that her first choice would be a massive candlestick affixed with a contraption for attaching an oil lamp.73 Further, while Haliczer asserts with confidence that María used the stones to masturbate, Ana testifies that she had to yank the stones out of María,74 which I assume means that she had inserted them into her vagina again, not necessarily an obvious instance of masturbation. Now, María by no means offers a thoroughgoing report of her sexual preferences in the trial and I do not want to be assumptive, dismissive or judgmental of any sexual behaviors, but I do think that it is worth opening up the incidents for other possible interpretations.

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70 Haliczer, *Between Exaltation and Infamy*, 622-3
71 First testimony of Ana Ruíz
    AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61v-62r
73 First testimony of Ana Ruíz
    AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61v-62r
74 First testimony of Ana Ruíz
    AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 63r
I will suggest a possible alternative reading of the candlestick and the rocks that ties up a few of our loose ends. In researching further into the medical mysteries that hung about the dark, cavernous form of the early modern female, I came across a quote of Baernstein and Christopolus’:

To early modern Europeans, women’s bodies defied understanding, especially in their generative capacities. One never knew what sort of creature of substance the belly harboured until it was emptied…

Purges were considered by many early modern physicians to be necessary, imperative to the treatment of dropsy, especially when the swelling was located in the womb. For Costanza, the thirteen-year-old patient mentioned earlier (with the swollen belly and menstrual retention), her doctors prescribed a typical regimen for remedy: “exercise, purgatives and bloodletting.” While this treatment was designed to expel fluids trapped in the body, it was also detrimental to the fetus, which did not make it through the process. In addition to prescribing Costanza drugs, like aristolochia and artemisia, which induced expulsion of the womb’s contents, the monastery’s prioress testified that the physicians, …ordered her to run, so occasionally, she ran hard through the house. She also flagellated herself, got up to pray at matins, remained kneeling at length, fasted and did other exercises unsuitable for pregnant women as she never showed she had any thought of being pregnant.

With its physical astringency and emphasis on purging the contents of the womb, a dropsy treatment mistakenly prescribed to a pregnant woman would almost certainly terminate the fetus and expel it from her body. Given the ambiguities between dropsy and pregnancy and the frequent misdiagnosis thereof, it seems that Costanza’s case

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75 Baernstein and Christopolus, “Interpreting the Body,” 42
76 Ibid., 57
77 Ibid., 58
78 Ibid., 57
would have been one among several “dropsy” cases that resulted in an aborted fetus. “In this way,” Baernstein and Christopolus write, “early abortions could literally pass unnoticed.” Carla Spivack goes further to assert that, in early modern England, “the necessity of purging in the medical context” may have come with a “parallel acceptance of the purging of fetal matter.” Christopolus corroborates that, on the Italian side, “most uterine expulsions were not treated as sins or crimes.” However, past the contentiously defined point of “quickening” at which a fetus was thought to possess human personhood, a uterine expulsion was considered a sinful act of “fetal murder,” and was tried as a most egregious crime.

While we will examine the criminal implications of abortion later on, for now we will rest our attention on this rickety fulcrum between an accepted expulsion and a ‘fetal murder.’ The trial that followed Costanza’s delivery of the stillborn centers around questions of a woman’s relationship to the unknowns of the female body—Could a woman truly mistake the fetal stirrings in her abdomen for fluid? Could her apparent attempts to heal herself have doubled as attempts to abort an unborn fetus? Could she be hiding something in the dark ambiguities of her body, harnessing its mystery for her own purposes?

We have no concrete evidence that María’s insertion of the candlestick and the pebbles into her body were attempts to abort a fetus. We do not even know if she was pregnant like Quiteria claimed, or if she was living with an uncomfortable fluid retention.

What we do know is this: purges of the womb were not uncommon and were even

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79 Ibid., 58
81 John Christopoulos, "Abortion and the Confessional in Counter-Reformation Italy*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 443-484, 446.
82 Riddle 267
83 Spivack, “To Bring Down,” 6
considered “medically desirable.” We also know that while Quitería and Bernardo allege María’s pregnancy, neither they nor anyone else mentions a birth or baby following. So, if María was dropsical, is it possible that the candlestick incident may have been some attempt to expel the fluid accumulating inside her. If María was pregnant or thought that she was, we can consider the possibility that her insertion of a 4.5-foot wooden pole into her vagina was an attempted abortion. Although most abortions of the time were procured by ingesting herbal abortifacients, Riddle finds abortive pessaries, devices inserted directly into the vagina, mentioned in the Hippocratic Oath.

Failure to mention a birth or pregnancy is not evidence of abortion in and of itself. If María was pregnant, it is quite possible that she miscarried of natural causes—in light of her beatings, flagellations, and fasting, her daily life in many ways mimicked the astringencies of a dropsy treatments. It is also possible, given Quitería’s opinion that she looks “within days of giving birth” that María did deliver a baby, alive or dead, in a secret birth. Gowing studies secret births and infanticides in early modern England, writing that, of the documented cases, “most [women] described giving birth entirely alone, often leaving shared rooms or houses to give birth in secret.” If María delivered a live baby in a secret birth, it is possible that she, like Margerita Baretta, the woman impregnated by her confessor/lover that Haliczer mentions, gave up the baby to a foundling hospital or perhaps. In light of the social legal repercussions and the

84 Baernstein and Christopolus, “Interpreting the Body,” 65
85 John M. Riddle, Eve's herbs: a history of contraception and abortion in the West (Harvard University Press, 1999), 38.
86 Gowing, “Secret Births,” 102
87 Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 138-9
difficulties María would face in raising a child in her financial situation, there is also the sinister possibility that a live birth may have resulted in infanticide.

It is difficult to know how far we should take these possibilities when we have such little explicit evidence to confirm them. I would venture that the silences around the possible pregnancy and abortion do just as much to corroborate these hypothesis as to discredit them. For in the secret courtroom chambers of the Inquisition, we can only expect that the villagers would sometimes pad their testimony around certain spiny topics or avoid them altogether in order to protect themselves. Pregnancies of unwed women and most certainly the termination thereof are two such spiny topics. To enforce its reinvigoration of sexual governance, the Counter-Reformation program implicated entire communities to police the bodies of women in particular. Authorities expected a certain “watchfulness over pregnant women” to insure that they would not abort a fetus. Thus, in some ways, to acknowledge a woman’s pregnancy was to implicate oneself in some moral responsibility for her. The stakes for such an implication, Christopolus explains, were high:

Counseling or showing favor to a woman seeking to abort (sgravedanza) was condemned as a violation of the fifth commandment. ‘Anyone’ and ‘others’ who help or give a woman medicines to abort were deemed accomplices to homicide. It is unclear whether such statements targeted the man responsible for the pregnancy, or whether they were addressed to other women who assist in the abortion.

Perhaps the fear of implication and responsibility explains Ana Ruíz’s total silence around María’s swollen belly. This is not necessarily to suggest that Ana aided María in an abortion. But rather, any mention of María’s pregnancy may have opened a whole

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88 Gowing, “Secret Births,” 88
89 Christopolus, “Abortion and the Confessional,” 455
90 Ibid.
floodgate of questions for Ana. Gowing comments, “Only rarely did the women who lodge with the accused record any suspicions: it was safer to have known nothing.”

The penalties for abortion in civil law varied regionally, usually depending on the status of the fetus’s development and sometimes the extenuating circumstances of a specific case. A claim to ignorance, like Costanza’s, for example, might temper a court ruling; likewise if a woman could prove that she would not have the means to feed her unborn child. On the other hand, evidence suggesting that the pregnancy was terminated to hide an illicit sexual encounter would be punished quite severely.

This, the fear of outing an illicit sexual relation, was a commonly-cited motive for abortion in Post-Tridentine Europe. In the wake of the Counter-Reformation’s crackdown on celibacy, extra-martial, non-normative, and non-procreative sex, a pregnant belly was often damning evidence of sinful sexual behavior. Thus, purging a pregnant womb was the best way to be rid of the evidence. To address this pattern, Counter-Reformation clerics looked to confessors. Although this seems like a strange choice in light of the concurrent and quite interwoven pattern of sexual misconduct in the priesthood, clerics hoped to utilize the intimacy of confessional relationships to educate penitents about abortion and its sinfulness. Confessors, thus, had access to ample literature and information on abortion to pass along to the laypeople and, it turns out, to put to use themselves. There were many cases in which confessors actually recommended or procured an abortion for a woman he had impregnated. Christopolus writes,

91 Gowing, “Secret Births,” 102-3
92 Baernstein and Christopolus, “Interpreting the Body,” 67
93 Ibid.
94 Riddle, Eve’s Herbs, 89
95 Christopolus, “Abortion and the Confessional,” 446
96 Ibid., 457-8
Here it was priests who were leaned in abortion, teaching and giving their lovers the means to terminate their unwanted pregnancies. This was necessary to avoid the consequences of their illicit sexual activities. As many men entered, or were placed by their families, into the clergy for economic, political and dynastic reasons, it is not surprising that many did not practice celibacy. The pregnant body of a lover was the site of a priest’s sin and future scandal.97

Christopolus’s study, “Abortion and the Confessional,” then somehow leads us back to the Friar and the possibility of a sexual relationship between him and María. It does seem curious that, given the Catholic Church’s stringent campaign against this behavior, the Inquisition did so little to investigate further into this possibility. But, Christopolus notes:

Confessor, bishops, and popes were well aware of the dangers inherent in bringing a procurer of abortion to light: public knowledge of an illicit sexual relationship, be it defloration, rape, adultery, or incest, could cause scandal and social disruption.98

Perhaps with the scandal of María’s mystical forgery finally laid to rest, the courts wanted to return a modicum of order to Colmenar, and so they did not press further the question of his sexual relations with female penitents. Keitt takes up a case that is in many ways quite similar to María’s in which the accused, Eugenia de la Torre, purported spiritual gifts, claimed demonic possession, and a touted a mysterious abdominal swelling.99 However, in Eugenia’s case, the inquisitors did investigate her apparent pregnancy further. While she declared her pregnancy a diabolical one, the inquisitors concluded that she was actually physically impregnated by her soliciting confessor and that she had delivered a stillborn.100 So, we see that this story arc was certainly a possible one for María’s inquisitors to reconstruct from the evidence given, but there is a key difference between the two cases that may explain why María’s inquisitors may not have

97 Ibid., 463
98 Christopolus, “Abortion and the Confessional,” 446
99 Keitt, Inventing the Sacred, 173-5
100 Keitt, Inventing the Sacred, 173-5
followed this route: Eugenia confessed to having sexual relations with her confessor and María did not.\textsuperscript{101} While Eugenia ultimately retracted this admission, the fact that it left her lips in the first place, it seems, was evidence enough.\textsuperscript{102} Despite whatever she may have endured in the secret prisons of the Inquisition, María held fast to her initial declaration that nothing ever happened between her and Friar Montero. Her steadfastness here could be a commitment to the truth if, in reality, their relationship was non-sexual. If María’s sexual experiences with the Friar were non-consensual and traumatic, it would be entirely understandable that she would not want to or feel able to discuss them in court. Whether non-consensual or consensual, María could feel stifled or silenced by shame or fear of consequences. Or, of course, it is possible that she does not speak on their sexual relationships to protect the one she loved. Haliczer writes,

\begin{quote}
Love relationships proved to be a significant barrier to the exercise of the Inquisition’s jurisdiction over solicitation since female penitents would often conceal what they had done in order to protect their clerical lovers in spite of their own feelings of anxiety.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

He goes on to cite cases in which female penitents kept secret a sexual affair until they lay on their deathbed.\textsuperscript{104}

This possibility, that María Cotanilla and Friar Montero had a fervent and tumultuous love affair, is hard to resist. It does all fit rather neatly together: the intimate hours unsupervised in the Friar’s house, the frequent allusions to his sexual tendencies, the man through María’s window and the carnal act that night, María’s ensuing swollen belly, the allegations of pregnancy, the pebbles, the candlestick, the pendulum of loyalty and betrayal between them. However, as we learn time and time again from human lives

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 174
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Haliczer, \textit{Sexuality in the Confessional}, 139
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
throughout history, the neat and tidy is practically mythic and things almost never quite fit together.

Parsing the nature of Friar Montero and María Cotanilla’s relationship is crucial to understanding the nature of their story, the trial, and María’s lived experience. While sex does not necessarily determine relationships, it does seem to color the power dynamics. Imagining them as spiritual friends or lovers puts them in a partnership. We can see how a collaborative energy as such could have been earnestly directed towards María’s spiritual goals or how it might have been harnessed to fuel an elaborate plot for money and fame. If we imagine Friar Montero as an abusive authority figure, then it seems more likely that he was either exploiting her earnest spiritual aspirations for his own personal gain or that he had coerced her into the scandal. If, on the other hand, María had the upper hand, it is not hard to imagine her manipulating the Friar to advance her career. What’s more, if we are to try to understand María’s life, then we must consider how this central relationship played out in her mind and body. Was she abused, abusive, confused, in friendship, in love? This, we cannot know for certain. We can, however, appreciate how much one relationship can rewrite the story of a life.
Primary Source Citations

Scene 1 – The Friar’s File
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
August 19, 1674

“A few days…since that day” [Q]
First testimony of Ana de Castillo
AHN, Inq., August 19, 1674, leg. 114, exp. 112, f. 2

“There is one…in the trial”
Note: Ana de Castillo’s testimony is filed first in the trial of Friar Francisco Montero but María Cotanilla is officially listed as witness n° 1.

Scene 2 - La Ciega and Montero, friend to women
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
December 4, 1675

“The following testimony...with great honor” [Q]
Testimony of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., December 4, 1674, leg. 114, exp. 112, f. 10r-12r

Scene 3 – Diego Ximenez de Soto’s Report
From the desk of Diego Ximenez de Soto
November 19th, 1677

“Three days after…by, Diego Ximenez” [Q]

Scene 4 – Antonio Bustos Testifies
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
February 4th, 1678

“Antonio Bustos does...before the court”
First testimony of Antonio Bustos in the trial of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., February 4, 1678, leg. 114, exp. 12, f. 29

“This very day...have already deposed” [Q]
Ibid., f. 30r
Scene 5 - Seventy-Seven Days
The Mendietta-Sanchez Household
Date: Unknown

“María is in …protect her chastity”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30

“The other day…make me fall”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30

“Welcome is a…like wind itself”

“And you know…sausage-of-a-man, Friar Maroto”
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 31v

Scene 6 - How They Left Her
The Plaza Mayor – The Ruiz Household
September 3rd, 1675 – Date: Unknown

“It's by the…leave this woman be!”
First testimony of Ana Ruiz
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 63v

“Leave her, spirits!...this woman be!” [Q]
Ibid.

“She recalls the…they left me” [Q]
Ibid., f. 63r

Scene 7 – The Man Through the Window
The Mendietta-Sanchez Household
Date: Unknown

“I had closed…been so relieved”
First hearing of María Cotanilla
AHN, Inq., September 27, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 168v

“I tell you, I…You hear me?”
First testimony of Bernardo Mendietta  
AHN, Inq., August 31, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 55r

“I was in…to stagger out”  
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez  
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30v

Scene 8 – The Growing Gut  
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo  
June 28th, 1675

“It was after…you’re done breastfeeding”  
First testimony of Quiteria Sanchez  
AHN, Inq., June 28, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 30v

“María, if we…of giving birth.”  
Ibid.

“Quiteria quickly moves…to tempt her”  
Ibid., f. 31r

Scene 9 - The Candlestick  
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo  
September 11th, 1675—September 3rd, 1675—July 8th, 1675—September 2nd, 1675

“It was about...her from court.”  
First testimony of Lucía Ruíz  
AHN, Inq., September 11, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 69

“Ana Ruíz mentions...believe the worst”  
First testimony of Ana Ruíz  
AHN, Inq., September 3, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 61v-62r

“What she cannot...La Ciega herself?”  
First testimony of Luísa Sanchez  
AHN, Inq., July 8, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 36

“Luísa Sanchez was...down her legs”  
First testimony of Luísa Sanchez  
Ibid.

“Friar Montero recounts...most deeply pained”  
Second testimony of Friar Francisco Montero  
AHN, Inq., September 2, 1675, leg. 114, exp. 4, f. 58v
Scene 10 – The Friar’s Sentence
The Holy Office of the Inquisition of Toledo
May 28th, 1678

“We do rule…of eight leagues” [Q]

The Sentencing of Friar Francisco Montero
AHN, Inq., May 28, 1678, leg. 114, exp. 12, s.f.
“[T]he technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”

-- Jacques Derrida

CONCLUSION

I set out on this endeavor to lose a life story from its archival fixture and see where it would lead me. The Spanish Inquisition inscribed María Cotanilla in the record as “the accused.” Since that was María’s only encounter with the archive, the Inquisition is thus, in a sense, still holding her as such—locked away in the secret prisons, confined to her cell. In re-writing María’s life, I intended to spring her from the Inquisition’s custody, to get to know her other personae and to follow her as she moved through them and through her world.

As her trial transcription was all I had, this seemed a rather impossible pursuit. For, to borrow from Derrida, the Spanish Inquisition was the “archiving archive” for María’s Cotanilla’s life history. Thus, the Inquisition had monopole control over her “relationship to the future” and, reciprocally, over our relationship to her. The manuscript of her court proceedings and what the Inquisition preserved within its folios were the only materials I had to try and construct (or reconstruct) the fullness of her being.

Thus, in my attempts to free María Cotanilla’s story, I was forced to collaborate with the very institution that persecuted her and banished her from her home. The inquisitors had not

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1 Derrida, Archive Fever, 17.
intended to biographize María but, in the absence of other records, it was only through their interrogations of her that I could glean information about her life. As I mentioned in my introduction, this collaboration was not a tenuous one. It was not the inquisitors’ prerogative to explore the art and imagination in María’s stories and it they were certainly not in the business of setting her life loose into the annals of history.

The Inquisition sought to root out unorthodoxy, in order to protect the Catholic faith, and to preserve the supremacy of its order. Rawlings summarizes the purposes of these interrogations:

The inquisitors tried to judge the soul of the accused, to discover whether or not his deeds reflected a system of belief that deviated from that of the established church. They endeavoured, at least when dealing with Old Christians, to lead them back to orthodox ways.²

The Inquisition only searched for sparks of heterodoxy to extinguish them. As a vehement, brutal, and widely-feared instrument of social control, the Inquisition implicated laymen into the execution of its authority. Kamen puts it:

Neither familiars nor comisarios, however, were meant to be spies, and the records of the Inquisition show clearly that the majority of denunciations were made not by them but by ordinary people—neighbours, acquaintances—in response to appeals made in the edicts of faith or simply as a result of personal conflicts. There was no need to rely on a secret police system, because the population as a whole was encouraged to recognize the enemy within its gates.³

In María’s trial we watch as her neighbors, friends, and acquaintances turn denounce her before the Inquisition one by one. Without a family, the villagers of Colmenar de Oreja comprised María’s only community and yet, with the Inquisition’s encouragement, she was banished as an “enemy within [the] gates.”

There is a great irony in the Inquisition’s widespread apparatus for hunting down and persecuting those spouting heterodox beliefs: in recording the trials of these “dangerous” and

² Rawlings, The Spanish Inquisition, 32.
³ Kamen 143
“scandalous” people, the Inquisition effectively preserved their histories and their unorthodox beliefs. Although the Inquisition sought to uproot or reform them, it introduced us to a colorful population of unusual people. It unwittingly permitted us to form relationships to them—to learn about them, wonder about them, even admire them. Although they probed these dissident belief systems, stories, ideas, and practices, in order to condemn them, we are free to celebrate them.

I spent months and months struggling against the rigidities, impersonality, and coerciveness of the Inquisition’s archiving of María. At the same time, however, the Inquisition is the only reason I had the chance to meet her. In its imperious trial of María Cotanilla, it made a space to investigate and ultimately preserve all that was outlandish, unconventional, and wayward about her. To invoke the rest of the Derrida quote above, “The archivization produces as much as it records the event.”

While María had already been touting her sacrilege and heretical claims, her visions and ecstasies, and her stories, the Inquisition sat down with her, and made time over the course of two years to listen to them and to write them all down. This was, perhaps, what surprised me most in my struggle with against the archive. For all of María’s personhood that it left behind, it did deem her belief and stories to be “archivable content.”

While I had to work to expand this content from its collapsed, two-dimensional form, it somehow survived 350 years and made its way into my hands. It was perhaps for this reason that I felt so indebted to the document. While I had set out to navigate the brackish waters of White’s postmodern historicity, I somehow, over the course of the project, made my way back to firmer historical ground. I still believe that the truth is a meager sliver amid the vast possibilities that make a reality. However, once I realized how unlikely and precious it was to have this specific sliver of

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reality in my hands, I became more and more committed to making the document visible in my work.

I encountered several moments while writing the narrative scenes where the actual occurrences, dialogues, and fabulations, made better stories than anything I could have created— their truth was stranger than fiction. I did not want to miss this very important fact of this history in my retelling. I noticed myself, over the course of the piece, reeling in my own fictive contributions. While I narrativized and emplotted this history throughout I became more comfortable with my discomfort in the ambiguity between my imagination and the imaginations that María and the other villagers of Colmenar de Oreja had already infused into the juridical proceeding.
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