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**DAMSELS AND DEITIES: FOREGROUNDING THE FEMININE  
IN SISTER MARIA DE MESQUITA PIMENTEL'S  
MEMORIAL DOS MILAGRES DE CRISTO E TRIUNFO DO DIVINO AMOR**

**DONZELAS E DEIDADES: O FEMININO COMO DESTAQUE NO  
NO MEMORIAL DOS MILAGRES DE CRISTO E TRIUNFO DO DIVINO AMOR  
DE SOROR MARIA DE MESQUITA PIMENTEL**

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**Abstract:** Our essay focuses on what we see as a pivotal scene from Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel's *A Commemoration of the Miracles of Christ and the Triumph of Divine Love*, namely the arrival of the Virgin Mary at the Wedding at Cana, in the poet's reimagined depiction of the famous biblical passage. We examine the key attributes that simultaneously identify the mythological female characters in Mary's cortege while also representing different aspects of Mary's own personality and mission. Our analysis highlights the role played by the feminine in the construction of Sister Pimentel's epic poetry and allows us to assess the extent to which her more female-centred perspective provided a challenge to the androcentric stereotypes of her day.

**Key words:** Female representations; women authors; Maria de Mesquita Pimentel; the Virgin Mary; Greek mythology.

**Resumo:** O nosso ensaio tem por objetivo analisar uma cena charneira do *Memorial dos Milagres de Cristo e Triunfo do Divino amor* de Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel, no sentido de identificar as personagens femininas que acompanham a Virgem Maria em cortejo para as Bodas de Canaã, na versão da famosa passagem bíblica reimaginada por Soror Maria Pimentel. Algumas das características dessas donzelas mitológicas não apenas permitem a sua identificação, mas também, no seu conjunto, representam vários aspetos da personalidade e missão da Virgem Maria. Na nossa análise,

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destacamos tanto a importância do feminino na construção desta obra de poesia épica, como o grau de divergência entre a perspectiva proporcionada por Soror Maria Pimentel e os estereótipos androcêntricos da sua época.

**Palavras-chave:** Representações femininas; autoria feminina; Maria de Mesquita Pimentel; A Virgem Maria; mitologia grega.

## Introduction

As the author of three volumes of epic poetry tracing the childhood, miracles and passion of Christ (*Memorial da Infância*, *Memorial dos Milagres* and *Memorial da Paixão*<sup>3</sup>), Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel (1581-1661<sup>4</sup>) could be considered both exceptional and marginal. After taking holy vows, she spent the rest of her life attached to the Cistercian Convent of São Bento near Évora, South-Central Portugal, close to her birthplace. Though her poetry appears to have been aimed at a mainly female readership, unusually for 17th century literature of this or any other genre, in telling the story of Christ, it is female characters who are foregrounded by the narrator, ranging from the Virgin Mary herself, through various female allegorical representations of virtues (such as Wisdom) and vices (such as Vanity), to the four damsels who form the Virgin Mary's entourage when she attends the wedding at Cana.

In Portugal, as elsewhere in Europe, from time immemorial women had been routinely subjected to arranged marriages aimed at defending family wealth and status, and were unable to work outside the home, manage any assets held in their own name, or seek a divorce. Those who opted, freely or under compulsion, to embrace an enclosed religious life, often did so on the grounds that it was preferable to being subjected to an equally cloistered domestic servitude in a family home, be it their own or some else's. For many, this alternative form of seclusion provided a means of gaining the literacy and associated skills on which their future intellectual and spiritual development depended, as well as offering opportunities to increase their personal self-realisation and enhance their social status. However, as Vanda Anastácio (2013, p.19) points out, the small number of nuns who saw study and, above all, writing as a means of self-fulfilment, were to experience a marginality that was particularly acute: "Portuguese literature has been described by critics as a universe in which literary authorship is so synonymous with male authorship that it is virtually impossible to produce an historical narrative of women's writing"[our translation].

In spite of the unprecedented status of Sister Maria Pimentel as the first woman to publish an epic poem in the Portuguese language<sup>5</sup>, her work remained invisible for almost 400 years until the publication of recent research by authors such as Isabel Morujão (1998), Antónia Fialho Conde (2009) and Fabio Mario da Silva (2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). She provides yet another historical example of the lack of recognition

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3. Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel planned a trilogy of epic poetry on the birth, miracles and passion of Jesus, respectively. Only the first was published in her lifetime and has recently been re-edited with an introduction by Fabio Mario da Silva (Pimentel 2016). The second and third parts existed only in manuscript form and had to be transcribed before publication, each also accompanied by an introduction by Fabio Mario da Silva (Pimentel 2017 and Pimentel, forthcoming).

4. There is still some uncertainty concerning the precise dates of Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel's birth and death. We have adopted those suggested by Diogo Barbosa Machado (1752, p. 427) in volume III of his *Biblioteca Lusitana, Crítica e Cronológica*.

5. "By writing an epic text – a genre that constituted the pinnacle of the masculine authorial project – Sister Maria Pimentel emerges, in the European context, as a pioneer, preceding even that great figure of French literature, Anne-Marie du Bocage, whose *La Colombiade, ou, La foiportée au nouveau monde* (1758) was the first epic text to be written by a Frenchwoman, and whose work, through translation, has attained truly global status" (Silva, 2014, p. 98).

accorded to women writers and the marginal position that, over the decades and centuries, they were attributed in the creative community and in the literary canon. Commenting on the oblivion in which Sister Maria Pimentel's work lay for so long, and what may have motivated her display of "reckless daring" in both her choice of theme and her foregrounding of women characters, Ana Luísa Vilela (2017, p. 71) elegantly poses the key questions:

"Can a Baroque epic be written as early as 1639 by a woman [who claimed to be] 'so lacking in science'? Can a woman author be so daring as to use epic poetry to address a theme of the first water, namely the childhood of Jesus? Is a profoundly Catholic epic written by a 17th century Portuguese nun at the time of the Inquisition still able to enchant us today, whether we read it as an impassioned prayer, or as a devotional narrative whose metre has been delicately crafted to be simultaneously heroic and intimate? Yes, on all counts" [our translation].

To these pertinent questions, we would add one more: "Can a woman author be so courageous – or, indeed, so reckless – as to use epic poetry to deliver a message of hope to women, and remind men of the value of prudence? Of course, no epic poetry is ever devoid of an ideological underpinning of some description; its purpose is typically to deploy narrative and allegorical devices to identify and juxtapose attitudes and behaviour deemed virtuous and those deserving of condemnation. As Bowra (1962, p. 13, *apud* Silva, 2014) reminds us "The great hero (...) appeals to two deep impulses of the human heart, the desire for glory and the respect for sacrifice. (...) The hero sacrifices his life and wins thereby an immortal glory".

In the light of studies already undertaken of how and why Sister Maria Pimentel came to give such prominence to female characters, the present article seeks to highlight some of the nuances of female characterisation that emerge in a single but pivotal scene in Canto 3 (stanzas 20 – 53) of the *Memorial dos Milagres de Cristo e Triunfo do Divino Amor* ("A Commemoration of the Miracles of Christ and the Triumph of Divine Love"), portraying the Virgin Mary's arrival at the wedding at Cana. This depiction strays from the strict Biblical account (in John 2. 1-5), in which the mother of Jesus was present at the wedding feast and urged Him to act over the shortage of wine; the scene begins before the wedding, with Sister Maria Pimentel imagining the Virgin Mary's arrival accompanied by a female entourage. This device provides a means of familiarising the reader with various aspects of Mary's character and role, thereby further endorsing her as a key focus of veneration.

Without ever confirming the identities of the four damsels, the narrator gradually reveals them to be mythical deities by presenting a poetic inventory of their respective gifts and predispositions, in the hope that the reader will interpret them as aspects of the Virgin Mary's own character and attributes. As Silva concludes: "In a single – indeed, singular – personality, Mary combines the attributes of beauty, fragility and bravery, and is described [by Sister Maria Pimentel] as a woman of superhuman characteristics: 'Not only in the perfection and grace of her soul is she a singular and superhuman phoenix'." (2016b, p. 100; our translation).

Before Sister Maria Pimentel began her exercise in epic poetry, so much ink had already been spent on glorifying masculine feats in both prose and verse that she decided to highlight feminine deeds and, in doing so, subtly undermined the stereotype underpinning the limited respect or trust that men have conventionally accorded to women. To this end, she deploys a Chorus of four goddesses – not quite the classical Greek Chorus but something in that style – as a dramatic device evoking a wider feminine community that also comprises the poet, the narrator, the inspirational muse and the women who so courageously followed Christ<sup>6</sup>, all of whom make their varied contributions to the process of foregrounding the feminine. Seen this way, the *Memorial* is a paean to women, to sharing and to mutual appreciation, and to the formation of a uniquely female system of values (Silva, 2017, pp. 24-25).

Before proceeding from these preliminary considerations to a discussion of the stanzas that describe the Mary's attendance at the wedding at Cana, presented throughout in both their original 17th century Portuguese and in a relatively free English translation<sup>7</sup>, it would be helpful to make our (hypo)thesis more explicit. We believe the identification of the four damsels to be a crucial factor in understanding the Sister Maria Pimentel's decision – in a work that, after all, announces itself as thematically focusing on Christ's birth, miracles, and passion – to foreground the feminine. Sister Maria Pimentel casts the Virgin Mary in the role of an "epic heroine" (Silva, 2014, p. 56) and introduces four anonymous female characters who, by virtue of the qualities and mission attributed to each of them by, represent one or more facets of the role and Mary's personality, not only in this portrayal of the first miracle performed by Jesus, but also in the epic poem's account of the unfolding of the last phase of His life on earth. This device allows the author to explore more deeply various facets of the Marian personality<sup>8</sup>, and to deliver certain 'messages' not only with regard to the female condition in 17th century Portugal but also, we believe, the qualities that might better equip the civil and religious authorities to challenge or, indeed, channel public agitation over continued Spanish suzerainty.

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6. The Bible refers to women such as Joanna and Susanna who materially sustained Jesus and the disciples, and to others who accompanied them during His ministry. Just a few women witnessed the crucifixion (the so-called Three Marys – Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene) and/or attended the burial of Christ (Mary of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and Mary Salome). Among those who first confirmed the resurrection – the "myrrh-bearers" so revered in the Orthodox Christian tradition – can be counted Mary of Bethany (the sister of Lazarus) and Mary (the mother of James).

7. Chris Gerry's English translation endeavours to reproduce the *ottava rima* ABABABCC that Sister Maria Pimentel employed, i.e. the rhyme scheme that Boccaccio, Camões and later Byron, among many others, used for their own epic and mock-epic works of poetry. It also adheres to the original metre, the *iambic pentameter*, albeit with some occasional use of eight syllable rather than the more typical ten-syllable lines. The translator is grateful to his co-author Fabio Mario da Silva and to Cláudia Pazos Alonso for their suggestions and corrections.

8. "According to the narrator, there are several facets to Mary's personality and numerous qualities she displays: (1) her virginity (Canto III, stanza 60, p. 43; Canto V, stanza 19, folio 69; Canto VII, stanza 55, p. 107; Canto IX, stanza 46, p. 134); (2) her divinity (Canto VI, stanza 48, p. 88); (3) her majesty (Canto III, stanza. 68 fl. 45; Canto IV, stanza 4, folio 52; Canto V, stanza 16, folio 68); (4) her prudence (Canto III, stanza 63, p. 44); (5) her beauty and the sweetness of her character (Canto III, stanza 70, folio 45); (6) her maternal nature (Canto VI, est. 48, fl. 88; Canto X, stanza 79, p. 156); and (7) her uniqueness/perfection (Canto IX, stanza 43, p. 133; Canto X, stanza 8, p. 144)" (Silva, 2014, p. 56; our translation).

## Damsels and deities: identifying the Virgin Mary's entourage at the wedding at Cana

In her depiction of the wedding at Cana, even before Jesus performs what is taken to be the first public miracle of His ministry, namely the transformation of water into wine, Sister Maria Pimentel evokes a very striking scene. The Virgin Mary arrives at the wedding accompanied by four damsels carrying her on what appears to be a throne.<sup>9</sup> Here are the first stanzas, describing the moment when she and her entourage are first seen approaching the house where the wedding is to be held.

### 1.1 *The arrival of the Virgin Mary and her entourage.*

[20] A Santíssima mãe cousa é notória  
Que quando era decente ia seguindo  
Com glória accidental a toda a glória  
O filho que de Amor a vai ferindo  
E chegando-se já perto a vitória  
De sua divindade ir descobrindo  
No primeiro milagre inestimável  
Achar-se ela ali é indubitável.

It has now become a well-known story –  
Mary, a young woman no more  
Followed, in a peerless act of glory,  
The son whose love would grieve her sore.  
The time drew near that would ensure He  
Revealed His divinity; and therefore  
Worked His first miracle that day  
With Mary present, as the Scriptures say.

[21] Sucedeu que em Canaã de Galileia  
Que era uma vila rica tão vistosa  
Que enquanto o mar abarca e o sol rodea  
Outro senão achava mais lustrosa  
Umas bodas de muito boa estreia  
Se fizeram em casa generosa  
Mais que nobre real pois a escritura  
Afirma nela estar a Virgem pura.

It came to pass in Galilee,  
In Cana, a rich and resplendent town  
Bathed both by the sunlight and by the sea.  
A wedding feast garnering great renown  
Was consecrated lavishly  
With nuptials that would joyfully be crowned  
By the presence, so Scripture is telling,  
Of the Virgin in the host's fine dwelling.

[22] E para este banquete convidado  
Foi Cristo verdadeiro Deus eterno  
Com desejo entranhável esperando  
Daquela em quem reinava o amor materno  
Dos discípulos ia acompanhando  
Que sua vida era o seu governo  
E o vão seguindo alegres e gozosos  
Como sombras de seus raios fermosos

Who had been invited to join the throng  
But Christ, God true and eternal  
Who was so keenly awaiting the one  
For whom motherly love is her kernel.  
And the disciples He had brought along  
He'd guide their lives with a hand paternal.  
And they'd gladly follow Him all their days  
Like shadows cast by His shimmering rays.

[23] Consultou o Senhor com sumo aviso  
Ser levada entre aplauso copioso  
A soberana mãe que é paraíso  
Horto cerrado fresco e deleitoso  
E por traça de seu alto juízo  
Que em suas obras é maravilhoso  
Ordena ir metido este tesouro  
Por singular em labirintos d'ouro.

Our Lord asked that when His mother arrived  
She be received as befits her station –  
His sovereign mother, our paradise,  
Our walled garden of lush vegetation.  
With the fine judgement that characterised  
His every work – a true revelation –  
He ordered this pearl of value untold  
Dressed in fine fabrics embroidered with gold.<sup>10</sup>

[24] Porque os campos e flores alegrando

But why do fields and flowers rejoice,

9. The Portuguese word for throne (*trono*) need not be translated literally, even though, as the future Queen of Heaven, Mary clearly merits one. We could easily imagine the four damsels carrying the Virgin Mary on a sort of open litter or lady chair (*cadeirinha*), resembling the decorated floats (*andores*) on which holy statuary is often borne in religious processions in Europe and the Americas. In our translation, however, we suggest that the damsels gather around Mary, enclosing her as if in a bower of intertwined arms.

10. Rather than denoting royal "cloth of gold", the curious term *labirintos d'ouro* probably refers to a style of embroidery, called *bordado labirinto* in Portuguese and "cut-work" or "drawn-thread work" in English. Threads are selectively removed from the fabric, the borders left intact, the resultant mesh providing the structure on which motifs are embroidered – in this case using gold thread.

As fontes de cristal emudecendo  
As aves volatis lisonjeando  
Os sentidos humanos suspendendo  
Vinhã quatro donzelas caminhando  
Que para se ir seu lustre engrandecendo  
Nã val engenho arte nem ciẽncia  
Que ẽ pobre de epõtetos a eloquẽncia.

Crystal springs run quietly down,  
And birds flatter as they give voice,  
And humans look perplexed and frown?  
Four damsels now approach, with poise  
And with radiance that do so abound  
That Art and Science are abjured  
For their poverty of both style and word.

[25] De cãndidas e ricas vestiduras  
Lisonjeando a vista vem trajadas  
Luzidas muito mais que estrelas puras  
Que a todos a sua luz deixa eclipsadas  
Para ornato de suas formosuras  
Traziam cintos douro delicadas  
E louros porque tudo se lhe deve  
De esmeralda imortal nas mãos de neve.

In their rich and immaculate attire  
They grace the vista even from afar  
Blazing more brightly than pure astral fire  
Outshining every celestial star;  
Their golden filigree belts do inspire  
The thought that no jewel their beauty mars;  
Laurels a sign of the respect they owe  
To the gem they bear ‘tween hands pale as snow.

In the last line of this excerpt there is a reference to the “immortal emerald” (*esmeralda immortal*) which, taken literally, the damsels carried between them; according to legend, this was a large greenish, tablet-shaped stone (possibly jasper) bearing a cryptic inscription by the same Hermes Trismegistus who had revealed to mortals the secrets of alchemy.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, the intention of the reference is allegorical, with the tablet symbolizing the Mother of Jesus – she who is so intimately connected to God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus, and she who will act as the interlocutor and intercessor between earth and heaven – with the metaphor echoing both the function and wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus, and the process of oracular communication in ancient Greece and Rome.

In each of the following four sections of Canto 3, a narratorial voice provides an introduction, in most cases limited to a single stanza, followed by several more in which the damsel in question appears to read from a scroll of parchment (*letreiro*), on which she has written a sort of testimonial, in which she describes her powers and priorities<sup>12</sup>, thereby obliquely hinting at her identity.

## 1.2 The first damsel / deity [folio 60 verso – folio 62]

From the symbols she bears and the statements she makes, we can associate the first damsel with the Titan goddess Themis who, together with her daughters Dikē, Eunomia and Eirene, represented different aspects of justice and order in Classical Greek mythology.<sup>13</sup> Both Themis and Dikē are often depicted holding

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11. For the various versions of the inscription on the tablet and some associated commentary, see <https://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.htm>. The mythological figure of Hermes Trismegistus was the result of a syncretic fusion of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. Supposedly, the tablet was rediscovered during Alexander the Great’s eastward advance and then lost or hidden again. According to inscription, Hermes Trismegistus had mastered all three parts of the philosophy that explained how the world functioned – alchemy (the science of the sun), astrology (that of the stars) and theurgy (that of divine works).

12. We do not provide precise bibliographical references in the text for all the ‘clues’ to each damsel’s identity. To identify each of them, we drew heavily on a multiplicity of dictionaries of classical mythology and online resources dealing with divine symbology and genealogy. The dictionaries and sites most frequently used in this exercise are included in the bibliography.

13. Themis was originally a prophetic divinity, an attribute she inherited from her mother Gaia. She conducted oracular ceremonies at Delphi, where she communicated divine law to mortals, as well as divine will (i.e. ‘revisions’ to those laws). Subsequently, Themis became responsible for divine justice, and her daughters Dikē, Eunomia and Eirene for mortal justice, order and governance, and peace and prosperity, respectively.

a set of scales in one hand and sometimes also cradling a cornucopia in the other, the former symbolising divine order, law and justice, and the latter signifying the continued flow of creature comforts that the proper observation of social customs will ensure. In Sister Maria Pimentel's portrayal of Themis, the goddess holds the familiar scales of justice in one hand and, we assume, her parchment in the other.

**[26]** A primeira que cetro rico alcança  
Se bem por ser de Deus vivo retrato  
Trazia de ouro fino uma balança  
Que pesar justamente tem por trato  
Por peregrino modo dela lança  
Um rótulo luzido em seu ornato  
Que com cegar a vista luz tão pura  
Bem se podia ler esta escritura.

The first a jewelled sceptre bore  
The living image of God's own figure  
And carried scales of golden ore  
To assess all rights and wrongs with rigour  
And like a faithful pilgrim wore  
A badge that burned bright with untold vigour  
And with rays that no man's sight could survive  
Lit the words on the scroll she held up high:

**[27]** Ainda que os pincéis superiores  
Com matizes de novo luzimento  
Pintaram da justiça as vivas cores  
Para lustre de seu merecimento  
Só ela que conhece seus valores  
Na ideia imortal do pensamento  
A seu louvor fizera tiro franco  
Que tudo mais sem fim ficava em branco

'Though greater painters than I now portray  
Justice in a much more convincing hue  
In a brand-new light, as some like to say  
To add lustre to its virtues  
Only she who knows the part that it plays  
In arming our minds with timeless values  
Could praise justice so simply yet in full,  
And leave the eternal unknowable'.

**[28]** Não direis minha alteza toda inteira  
Singular soberana e excessiva  
Porque aqui quero ser só pregoeira  
Daquela parte que é distributiva  
O meu lugar está na cabeceira  
Sempre minha coroa é mais altiva  
Porquanto entre as morais virtudes belas  
Primeiro as teólogas me põe capelas.

'Speak not of my exalted state  
Singular, exceptional, sovereign,  
Here my only task's to adjudicate  
With equity those who've sinned.  
And to advise my Lord is my happy fate  
Thus my crown's the proudest of all my kin.  
Divines of my own sex call me  
The bedrock and peak of morality'.

**[29]** Não nasci para mim pois sou Rainha  
Que meu ser de mim própria me escasseia  
Consiste meu valor o se encaminha  
Ao fim de melhorar a sorte alheia  
Exemplar sou do sol, ventura minha  
Beleza que me doura e formosa  
Pois tanto fico mais engrandecida  
Quanto for mais a ele parecida.

'I'm born to serve for I am Queen.  
Of my own self not much is left;  
The good fortune of others, so it seems,  
I'm bound to advance in ways that are deft.  
My fate is to be like the sun – I mean,  
With beauty gilding me in warp and weft –  
My acclaim will never abate  
As long as it's the sun I emulate'.

**[30]** Porque assim como o sol belo alumia  
E neste de luzida bizarria  
Os outeiros, os vales e horizontes  
E como em rutilando o claro dia  
Reverbera nas mais líquidas fontes  
Dando, sem exceção por excelência  
A luz que lhe quis dar Deus per essência.

'For just as it kindly sheds light  
On valleys, escarpments and distant trails  
Waging its bizarre lucent fight  
In which its powerful rays never fail  
To glint off every watery detail  
Sharing the light with everyone  
That God had once kept for the sun'.

**[31]** Assim minha nobreza que é maciça  
Me faz força que empregue meus cuidados  
Em ir sempre jamais sem ser remissa  
A todos dando forma em seus estados  
Que o supremo e Real ser da justiça  
Consiste em dar a quantos são criados  
Sem nunca escassear o que mais custa

'My nobility stands on solid ground  
So I have strength and patience to take care  
At all times to ponder what I propound.  
My acts will make known a truth all should share:  
Justice, to reign supreme, must be found  
To give each creature on land, sea or air  
That which is priceless yet common as sand –

Aquilo que lhe toca com mão justa.

Treating each case with an impartial hand'.

[32] Metáfora sou eu, vivo traslado  
Da sacra original justiça pura  
Rica jóia de Adão naquele estado  
De vida, glória, luz e formosura  
Pois perdido este bem pelo pecado  
E ficando estragada a criatura  
Vou tudo justamente reformando  
Para que a sem-razão não vá reinando.

'I'm a metaphor, I can trace my line  
Back to primal justice, holy and pure,  
A state that was Adam's jewel so fine  
A life of such wondrousness and allure.  
All that once had been favours divine  
Was lost, Eden spoiled, so I'm sure  
That I'll be just, righting all that failed  
Lest evil return, unreason prevail'.

As the consort of Zeus, Themis earned the title “The Lady of Good Counsel”, and sat at his right hand, a privileged position from which to guide and temper his decisions. In the prefatory stanza 26, she is said to wear – almost as if it were a pilgrim’s shell – an ornament that shines brightly enough to blind, but whose rays illuminate the parchment that she holds up high. In her testimonial (stanza 28), she modestly stresses that her royal status as the wife of Zeus is a secondary consideration, and that adherence to divine law is paramount, her main concern being to apply appropriate punishment regardless of the transgressor’s status.

At the end of the same stanza, Themis stakes her claim as *prima inter pares*, asserting that her crown – i.e. that symbolising divine justice rather than her alliance with Zeus – is the “proudest” of the four. Her stalwart defence of the primacy of divine laws, moral rectitude, equality and impartiality has earned her veneration, particularly from women of the church and/or with strong religious convictions (‘Divines of my own sex call me / The bedrock and peak of morality’; *entre as morais virtudes belas / primeiro as teólogas me põe capelas*).<sup>14</sup> Here we have a first example of Sister Maria Pimentel providing her readers with an opportunity to identify a quality attributed to one of the goddesses – in this case impartiality in justice – as a quality that should be associated with the Virgin Mary herself.

In stanza 29, Themis poignantly comments on the burden of her duties as queen and counsellor to Zeus in a manner that reflects the plight of women high and low. She begins by saying that she was not born “for her own sake” (*não nasci para mim*) but to be selfless, as a queen seeking only to improve her subjects’ destinies and, by so doing, to gain favour and renown. It seems, however, that selflessness can amount to an act of auto-anthropophagy, something women recognise better than most. Obliquely, Themis is pointing to the contradiction that, by only serving others, she (and, by extension, mortal women) maybe depleting rather than replenishing their own individual essence as a person: “of my own self not much is left” (*meu ser de mim própria me escasseia*) she says, almost despairingly. Here, the dialectic between abnegation and self-affirmation seems equally valid, whether examined from the perspective of gender or that of spirituality, and has particular pertinence when viewed from within a hierarchised convent community by an erudite nun writing for a predominantly female public.

In the penultimate stanza of this section, Sister Maria Pimentel pointedly emphasises that equality

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14. Notwithstanding the temples, monuments and altars that were constructed in Greece to honour Themis, such as those at Thebes, Olympia and Athens (Pausanias, 1919, i. 22. §1), at Tanagra (*op cit.*, ix. 22. §1) and at Troezen, (*op cit.*, ii. 31. §8), Sister Maria Pimentel is speaking metaphorically. She deliberately uses the feminine form of the word “theologian” (*teóloga*, not *teólogo*) to indicate the popularity she had earned among women.



and impartiality are the supreme values underpinning justice. The fact that Themis had earlier raised the question of equity and impartiality, had revisited it twice in stanza 31 using language that was insistent to say the least, would suggest that, rather than naïvely reiterating a fundamental legal principal, Sister Maria Pimentel is subtly criticising how justice is applied in her day, both in general terms, and more specifically with regard to the unequal legal status of women.

In the final stanza of the section pertaining to Themis, Sister Maria Pimentel indicates that the exercise of impartiality in judgement has a particular resonance in the case of women, for if the goddess of justice cannot show herself to be totally unbiased, how can her actions ever expunge the stigma of original sin? It is conceivable that here Sister Maria Pimentel is quietly encouraging women to be more like Themis (i.e. to adopt the quality of impartiality that the author is attributing to the Virgin Mary), if they want to be taken more seriously by men. If that is the case, then therein lies a contradiction: if men realise that women are questioning the way in which they dispense justice and are rejecting masculine expediency and impropriety in favour of absolute impartiality, is it likely that they would willingly accord ‘their womenfolk’ greater respect and power?

### 1.3 The second damsel / deity [folio 62 – 63 verso]

Evidence from the poem would suggest that the second damsel in the Virgin Mary’s entourage is Metis, a Titan deity, Zeus’s first wife, and goddess of wisdom, prudence, good counsel and indeed, of cunning. Though originally associated with knowledge of the more occult kind, we are again confronted by a goddess who acted as counsellor to Zeus. In her case, so prodigious was her intelligence that Hesiod referred to her as “wisest among gods and mortal men” (1914, p. 886), probably a reference to the manner in which she devised the strategy that ended the war between the Titans and the Olympian gods.<sup>15</sup>

In the description that prefaces Sister Maria Pimentel’s ‘transcription’ of the parchment Metis bears, the goddess is said to carry a diamond-studded globe, apparently in homage to the sun god Apollo, the child whom her husband Zeus had fathered with Leto. Before Metis reads the text, the narrator sets the scene:

[33] A segunda que raios cintilantes  
 Dos olhos quais estrelas fulminava  
 Nos graves ombros papos de volantes<sup>16</sup>  
 Trazia com que mais bela ficava  
 E de um globo de ricos diamantes  
 Que ser adulação do sol mostrava

From the second damsel’s brilliant eyes shone  
 Such dazzling light as when stars burn;  
 Flounces, paddle-shaped, hung upon  
 And beautified her shoulders stern;  
 From a globe of rich diamonds  
 Betokening her homage to the sun

15. Though a Titan, she advised the Olympian gods in their wars against her own kin, later becoming the first wife of Zeus. Either because he feared a prophesy that Metis would bear him a son greater than he, or because he wanted her awesome intellect to serve only him, he tricked her into changing herself into a fly (or, in some versions a drop of water) and swallowed her whole. Deep within the entrails of Zeus, she gave birth to Athena, who was famously born fully-armed from her father’s head.

16. The elusive phrase “papos de volante” probably refers to clothing, since a “papo” can mean a flounce, while “volante” may refer to the rudder-like shape formed by the vertically-hanging hem of an open robe.

Pendia este liteiro sem segundo  
Delicado, sutil, grave e profundo.

An inscription on parchment dangled down  
Its message delicate, grave and profound:

**[34]** Os alentos que as luzes copiosas  
Do sol sobre os planetas vão gozando  
O lustre que entre as pedras preciosas  
O carbúnculo do Rei delas vai mostrando  
A vantagem que o ouro nas formosas  
Minas aos metais está levando  
Leva com mais vantagem de excelência  
A todas as virtudes a Prudência.

‘The life that the copious rays  
Of the sun transport to every sphere;  
That the gleam the King’s red garnet displays  
No other gemstone can call its peer  
And that gold greater profit pays  
Than metals dug from any other mine  
All prove that Prudence is apt to nurture  
Excellence much more than any virtue’.

**[35]** Sou entre todas mestras da capela  
De todo o seu governo tenho a chave  
Porque não pode haver música bela  
Sem minha consonância doce e grave  
A seu compasso meu faltasse nela  
Tão longe fora o canto de suave  
Que desentoando espantaria  
Causando maior pena que alegria.

‘I, of all the mistresses of the choir  
Hold firm the reins of its whole government  
For all our music would be dire  
Without my kind and grave consent  
The melody would not inspire  
If my rhythm were not present  
An unkind shock and in such large measure  
As to cause more suffering than pleasure’.

**[36]** As outras tem somente por ofício  
O apetite cego ir temperando  
Mas eu tenho sem fim por exercício,  
A razão estar sempre governando  
É este o mais supremo benefício  
Pois como a experiência vai mostrando  
Não há cousa que tenha nesta vida  
Bom fim se não se for dela regida.

‘The other mistresses’ dedication  
Is to mitigating blind appetite;  
Yet in my own occupation  
Pure reason’s ever in the right.  
Ample cause for celebration  
For life shows us in black and white  
There’s naught that comes to a good conclusion  
If reason’s no part of the solution’.

**[37]** Sem mim não vale engenho nem ciência  
Porque o sujeito em que eu não tenho parte  
Converte em ignorância a sapiência  
De tudo escolhe sempre a pior parte  
Que faltando a virtude da prudência  
Ficam todas as cousas de tal arte  
Que o bem se torna em mal, e morte a vida  
Em vício a santidade mais subida.

‘Skill and science are worth naught without me;  
In matters over which I have no sway  
Wisdom is turned into stupidity  
That always follows the vilest way,  
Lacking forethought and clarity,  
And everything in the same disorder stays  
Life becomes death, good becomes wickedness  
And sin the pinnacle of saintliness’.

**[38]** Príncipes, reis, duques, imperadores  
E quantos mando tem mais opulento  
Tanto mais necessitam meus favores  
Para poderem ter bom regimento  
Tão copiosos são meus esplendores  
Que a todo o ser humano dão alento  
Sou o sol das discretas alegrias  
E sal das mais gostosas iguarias.

‘Barons, dukes, princes, kings and emperors  
The richer, they more they command  
The more they will need my favour  
If they are to soundly govern their lands  
But so well-accomplished are my labours  
I revive humanity’s zeal  
I’m both the sun that shines on joys discreet  
And seasoning in the tastiest meat’.

Metis begins by arguing that prudence, more than any other virtue, promotes excellence and, in a ‘musical’ metaphor that occupies all of stanza 35, she affirms the centrality of her other principal attribute – namely something Sister Maria Pimentel calls “reason” (*razão*) – and, on these grounds rather than those of her royal status, claims hierarchical superiority over the other deities. In contrast to her colleagues in the

Mary's entourage, whom she refers to as "the other chapel-mistresses" (*mestras da capela*)<sup>17</sup>, Metis claims that while the other goddesses merely mitigate the "blind appetites" of mortals, she uses prudence and reason to effect permanent changes in people's behaviour.

Essentially, Metis is arguing that while mortal compliance with divine laws is of undoubted importance, the gods should carefully ponder any action in advance, and prudence and reason should always prevail. In stanza 37, Metis says she has no influence over the "chapels" (i.e. the divine areas of influence and intervention) of the other three deities and observes that, without the principle of reason that govern her domain, neither talent nor science can exist. She concludes that if immortals act dogmatically or irrationally, rather than prudently and pragmatically, mortals will be unable to govern their own daily affairs in accordance with divine precepts and, as a result, ignorance, sin, and evil will prevail.

The words *capela* ("chapel") and *mestra* ("mistress"), used metaphorically to denote a specific field that a goddess oversees (e.g. justice, wisdom, war, agriculture, governance or fortune), may further symbolize the hierarchy of the convent, the religious order or even that of the Catholic Church as a whole. Seen this way, it would hardly be extravagant to speculate that, at a time when Portugal's simmering dissatisfaction over the Iberian Union with Spain was about to culminate in the restoration of an independent Portuguese throne, Sister Maria Pimentel is counselling prudence, pragmatism and reason at an individual, organisational and even socio-political level. Technically, the country was still under Spanish rule and while it is unlikely that courageous authors would have felt the full weight of the Inquisition, it remains unclear whether the publication of subtly dissident literature would have aided or undermined the burgeoning movement for Portuguese autonomy. Nonetheless, by making this heartfelt plea for Metis-like prudence rather than Zeus-like impetuosity, and directing it at literate women who, at home, may have been able to exercise some influence over their fathers, husbands and sons, Sister Maria Pimentel may have intended to pour holy oil on troubled waters, without diluting the determination of the Portuguese elite to recover their country's freedom.

#### 1.4 The third damsel / deity [folio 63 – 64]

At the end of stanza 39, in what is the shortest group of stanzas devoted to a member of the Mary's entourage, Sister Mary Pimentel suggests that third damsel holds aloft her parchment (*epigrama*) in her right hand, so that it can be illuminated by the light from the star emblazoned on her shield.

[39] A terceira gravíssima donzela  
Levava um peito d'armas invencível  
E na esquerda mão cândida e bela  
Escudo de valor incompreensível

The third of the damsels so grave  
Wore an unbreachable cuirasse  
And on her left arm comely and brave  
A buckler of incomparable class.

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17. The term *mestra de capela* ("chapel mistress") literally refers to the nun appointed to take responsibility for music in the convent. Nuns performing what today we might call management tasks were (and continue to be) designated *mestra*; for example, one would normally be given responsibility for the training of novices (in Portuguese, *mestra de noviças*).

Nele estava pintada uma estrela  
Que entre raios de luz inacessível  
Para maior brasão de sua fama  
la recopilando esta epigrama.

A star painted on it, pouring its rays  
Of light from worlds of celestial gas  
Onto a parchment that contained  
This statement to add lustre to her fame.

**[40]** Nas armas mostro bem minha inteireza  
Pois me coube por rara e alta sorte  
Com alentado brio na fraqueza  
Humana, torreão ser firme e forte  
Não trato do vigor que a natureza  
Dá que esse tem fim na vida ou morte  
Senão da forte generosidade  
Que não pode vencer o tempo e idade.

‘Under arms I best show my completeness  
To me it falls, as luck’s decreed,  
Against the vile press of human weakness  
To be a bastion of strength indeed.  
Not Nature’s vigour – such utter bleakness –  
That declines through life and by death is freed  
But the munificence undiminished  
That the passing of time cannot finish’.

**[41]** Sempre no campo estou posta em batalha  
Vencendo mil fortíssimos gigantes  
Com este forte escudo que me atalha  
Os golpes seus cruéis e penetrantes  
Porque não há empresa que mais valha  
Nem tenha mais quilates que os constantes  
Brios com que meu lustre fremosea  
A quem seus próprios vícios senhorea.

‘In battle I strive with fatal effect  
Slaughtering giants in their droves  
And with this brave shield I deflect  
Their barbarous and piercing blows.  
There’s no other endeavour I respect  
Nor one that greater value shows  
Than the noble deeds and worthy prizes  
Of one who has o’ercome her own vices’.

**[42]** Sou tão forte e constante nas empresas  
E minha poderosa força é tanta  
Que temores perigos e asperezas  
Nada me torna atrás, nada me espanta  
Não me faz o trabalho ter fraquezas  
Nunca a dificuldade me quebranta  
Quanto a guerra é maior mais inteireza  
Que é o timbre real da fortaleza.

Strong and loyal in my occupation  
So great is my strength that I am daunted  
Neither by danger, fear or privation;  
Never do I let myself be taunted;  
Nor let problems blunt my dedication;  
By weakness my mind is never haunted;  
The noise of war satisfies me the best  
It’s the sound of courage put to the test.

**[43]** Eu sou entre estas três irmãs donzelas  
Filha querida da sabedoria  
Entre suas coroas e capelas  
Mostra ter sempre a minha igual valia  
Porque se muitas graças moram nelas  
Com as minhas lhes dou suma alegria  
Porque sou da justiça, amparo e vida  
Pela mestra Prudência só regida.

Among the damsels, I alone by birth  
Am the dear daughter of Wisdom so fair;  
Than mine their qualities have no more worth  
Nor their chapels nor the great crowns they wear.  
Of their competencies there is no dearth  
But mine bring happiness beyond compare,  
For Justice, Life and Protection are they  
And Mistress Prudence alone they obey.

The third damsel is Athena, daughter to Metis and Zeus, and goddess of war and of wisdom, justice, governance, dexterity and the arts. She wears a fantastically-decorated breastplate – sometimes depicted as a separate piece of armour, sometimes as an integral part of the famous cloak or *aegis* she shares with her father. Though Athena is associated with other military symbols, in particular a shield depicting the Gorgon’s head, it is her iconic owl that attests to her most foremost attribute, namely wisdom, for she valued action tempered by prudence over the rash, emotional responses of the querulous war-god Ares, and was inclined to do battle only as a last resort, after pondering long and hard. Again, Sister Maria Pimentel subtly turns the gender stereotype of the era on its head: Athena’s caution, sobriety and reserve stands in stark contrast to the intemperate and irreflective actions of male gods, such as Zeus her father, or her half-brother Ares.

When, in stanza 43, Athena refers to the other three damsels as her “sisters”, this denotes their common membership of a divine sorority, rather than a blood connection between siblings – after all, one among them is her own mother, Metis. Echoing Metis in stanzas 35-36, Athena claims to be “the dear daughter of Wisdom”, going on to explain why she deserves higher status than these remaining two damsels. In another remarkable reversal of gender stereotypes, we find Sister Maria Pimentel honouring the prudence Athena inherited from her mother and which guarantees all mortals justice, protection and life<sup>18</sup>, rather than any traits she owed to her father, the notoriously spontaneous and erratic Zeus.

Notwithstanding her wisdom and prudence, the patriarchal stereotype of womanhood receives a further blow when, in stanzas 40 and 42, Athena twice admits to feeling most fulfilled in battle: *Nas armas mostro bem minha inteireza* (“Under arms I best show my completeness”) and *Quanto a guerra é maior mais inteireza / Que é o timbre real da fortaleza* (“The noise of war satisfies me the best / It’s the sound of courage put to the test”). Though amazons were not entirely absent from late medieval and early modern mythography, the intention of Sister Maria Pimentel’s choice of a warrior maiden as one of Mary’s entourage seems designed to correct the masculine notion of female weakness rather than to symbolise the gender inclusiveness of the Church Militant.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.5 The fourth damsel / deity (folio 65 – 66 verso)

The fourth damsel is Hecate, one of the lunar goddesses, an adept in sorcery, divination, necromancy and the use of medicinal plants, patroness of crossroads<sup>20</sup> and thresholds, protectress of the home, and one of the deities associated with the underworld, guiding souls to their final destination. Often depicted bearing torches or keys, she was later represented as having three aspects: heaven, earth, underworld; or full moon, half moon, new moon; or maiden, matron, elderly wise-woman, symbolising not only her spheres of influence but also the cycle of life and death. In late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Hecate’s identity began to converge with that of Artemis (Diana), and Selene (Luna), who were also granddaughters of Phoebe and, out of this syncretic process there emerged a triple goddess – of hunting and the forest, of chastity and the moon, and of witchcraft and the underworld. In the narrator’s description, Hecate holds a master key in her right hand<sup>21</sup>, symbolising her responsibility for all that Nature contains on earth, in the sky and under the sea. She

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18. In the last lines of her testimonial, Athena summarises her mission as advocating “justice, protection and life” – aims and attitudes not normally associated with warrior goddesses, but entirely consistent with Athena the patron of wisdom, dexterity, good governance and justice. Again, we encounter an overlap between the attributes of the four deities: Athena also claims to have an interest in justice, conventionally thought of as the principle spheres of responsibility of Themis.

19. It is worth recalling that Athena was included among the virgin deities, and often depicted as an almost androgynous figure, since her father had ostensibly given birth to her alone, making her the “motherless daughter” who has so intrigued classical Greek writers (Aeschylus, 2007, p.105) and modern psycho-analysts (see e.g. Jacobs, 2007, pp. 68, 89, 145, 149).

20. Her Roman counterpart was called Trivia (i.e. where three roads meet), reflecting Hecate’s patronage of crossroads, among other liminal sites.

21. In addition to torches, snakes, ropes, etc., the key was an important symbol of Hecate’s persona and of the underworld itself. The only other deity frequently depicted as holding a key was Hades.

is an *ur*-goddess, and her antiquity, multiple powers and vast dominion make her a Great Goddess, an *über*-goddess – whom her many worshippers called Saviour (*Soteira*) or Soul of the Cosmos.

At the end of two prefatory stanzas (rather than the conventional single stanza) before Hecate begins to read from the testimonial scroll that hangs from a fabulous chain around her neck, the narrator tells us that Hecate has composed her text in code (“with numbers and letters distinct”; *letreiro em cifra e letra à parte*) and is advised that “if the strange figures leave you perplexed, clarity will come by reading the text” (*E quem a cifra escura não penetra / Examine a que diz olhando a letra*).

**[44]** A quarta deidade soberana  
Cinha cos olhos seus graves cerrados  
Mostrando uma modéstia mais que humana  
Que deixava os sentidos admirados  
Modesta estava e descobria ufana  
Cercada de valores sublimados  
Entre as cinco açucenas da mão destra  
Uma luzida e forte chave-mestra.

The fourth sovereign deity  
Eyes shut tight in concentration  
Displaying superhuman modesty  
That so impressed the imagination.  
Her assurance grew when the laity  
Praised her virtues and extolled her station;  
From her right hand, extended daintily,  
Swung a heavy and gleaming master key.

**[45]** Rica cadeia vai dela pendendo  
Por tal modo invenção, engenho e arte  
Que quem for seu valor engradecendo  
Não pode exagerar a menor parte  
Do remate sutil ia descendo  
Outro letreiro em cifra e letra à parte  
E quem a cifra escura não penetra  
Examine a que diz olhando a letra.

She wore a necklace beyond price  
Made with such art and invention, I think  
That even doubling your wildest surmise  
Would do scant justice to its smallest link.  
From the fob there dangled a strange device  
Written with numbers and letters distinct.  
So, if the strange figures leave you perplexed  
Clarity will come by reading the text:

**[46]** Tive sempre com Deus tanta privança  
Sem nunca ofício ter de lisonjeira  
Que mo quis dar a mim de confiança  
Em ser até o fim da alma porteira  
Porque é na guarda dela a temperança  
Tão diligente, esperta e tão inteira  
Que nunca sofre entrar cousa danosa  
Nem pessoa que leia suspeitosa.

‘With God I always had intimacy  
Never using blandishments in my role  
He gave me all the bravery  
To be forever gate-keeper of the soul  
For by defending its sobriety  
With diligent skill I attain the goal  
Of barring anything that’s malicious  
And anyone thought to be suspicious’.

**[47]** Lisonjas, rogos, mimos nem presentes  
Não tem vigor com que eu seja vencida  
Porque são minhas forças tão valentes  
Que sempre tem vitória conhecida  
E por não dar entrada aos acidentes  
Que ocasionando vão ficar perdida  
Trago os olhos pregados sem ter vista  
Porque abertos não há quem lhe resista.

‘Gifts, entreaties, flattery or pleading  
None have the power to cause my defeat  
For mine is so unused to ceding  
And ever performs victorious feats  
I give accidents no heeding  
For to do so would mean retreat  
I keep my eyes shut so I cannot see  
For open there’s none who can resist me.’

**[48]** Na doce órfeia e métrica harmonia  
Da música suave e dileitosa  
Que faz o coração com melodia  
Lisonja dos ouvidos sonora  
Eu levanto o compasso e vou por guia  
Por ser nele tão destra e engenhosa  
Que se o concerto seu faltasse nela

‘In the harmonies, rhythms and sweet songs  
Of music refined and pleasing  
There’s much to delight the soul and ere long  
Favour the saddened heart’s easing.  
I tap my baton if the tune goes wrong  
And start skilfully twisting and teasing;  
If in your music I had not my say

Ficaria perdendo-se a capela.

All your players would drift away'.

[49] Não deixo como estou sempre assistindo  
E sua consonância em mim se encerra  
Com dissonância ir ponto subindo  
A desejar o mal que o bem desterra  
Nem sofro perder letra consentindo  
Que ao apetite baixo cá da terra  
Se sujeite o império do alvedrio  
E que per[c]a a rezar seu senhorio.

'I won't leave, I'll be present all the time.  
Though your harmony enfolds me inside  
Elsewhere discord begins to climb  
Craving the evil that good has denied.  
It harms me little to opine  
That the realm of free will is firmly tied  
Here on earth to the basest drives  
And praise for your lordship scarcely survives'.

[50] Com esta chave abro as oficinas  
Todas do coração, nas quais entrando  
Com minhas mãos em tudo peregrinas  
Ira, cobiça, amor vou temperando  
Arranco as ervas más, e de boninas  
Tão sutilmente as sei ir semeando  
Que parecem um fresco e alegre prado  
De purpúreas estrelas esmaltado.

'With this key I open every recess  
Of the heart and, with their contents in view,  
I can scrutinise every excess  
Wrath, covetousness, love – all get their due.  
I pull up the weeds, and then it's my quest  
To sow seeds where the thistles grew  
Creating a sight that truly appeals  
Purple stars strewn over afresh greenfield.'

[51] Inumeráveis são meus atributos  
Em graus superiores gloriosos  
A meus braços reais rendam tributos  
Todos os que tem títulos honrosos  
Sou árvore que brota muitos frutos  
E todos a saúde proveitosos  
Não só do coração que goza a Alma  
Mas também a do corpo alcança palma.

'So legion are my attributes  
That I cannot be judge of which is best  
Seigneurs, baronets, earls and dukes  
Pay tribute to my royal crest  
I am a tree that yields myriad fruits  
Food for the table and cures for the pest  
For a tranquil spirit needs a sound mind  
As well as health of the bodily kind.'

In stanza 46, Hecate speaks of her double duty to defend the soul against undue intrusion, whether by malicious thoughts, or through the influence of those who would do us harm, reflecting both her role in the underworld (supporting and advising Persephone, Hades' reluctant queen) and her function as a significant domestic deity protecting families against errant spirits. This role can also be inferred from the last two lines of stanza 47 ("I keep my eyes shut so I cannot see, for open there's none who can resist me"; *Trago os olhos pregados sem ter vista / Porque abertos não há quem lhe resista*) which suggest that Hecate customarily lowers her gaze or even shuts her eyes tightly, not out of modesty, but out of concern that innocent people might be inadvertently harmed by her soul-penetrating powers.

A second extensive 'musical' metaphor, similar to the one Metis uses in stanza 42, can be found in stanza 48. Here, Hecate's message is that none of the efforts of the other deities will achieve the desired effects without her contribution, though the nature of this key element is not made explicit. When Hecate, too, proposes herself as the authentic *prima inter pares* of the group, she is perhaps alluding to the indefinable magic that turns mere sounds into music ("I tap my baton if the tune goes wrong / And start skilfully twisting and teasing"; *Eu levanto o compasso e vou por guia / Por ser nele tão destra e engenhosa*). Put another way, though justice tempered by wisdom and reason are important to creating and maintaining harmony among gods and mortals alike, without Hecate's input, dissonance will prevail. But what precisely is Hecate's contribution? One approach may be to see it as a praxis rather than as an attribute – a holistic,

transcendental, over-arching understanding of cosmic coherence. This propensity to “see the big picture” is rooted in Hecate’s liminal nature, and enables her to look backwards and forwards, above and below, inside and out, to cross frontiers and explore intersecting and diverging paths, continually increasing and coalescing her fund of accumulated knowledge without ever losing her bearings.

In stanza 51, the last of this section before the narratorial voice returns, Hecate provides an example of this perspective. First she describes the myriad skills and qualities she possesses (“So legion are my attributes / That I cannot be judge of which is best”; *Inúmeráveis são meus atributos / Em graus superior es gloriosos*), concluding that she is “a tree that yields many diverse fruits”. Rather than limiting her intervention to one particular domain, she is able to deploy manifold attributes in response to a multiplicity of needs, and thereby protect both the physical integrity and spiritual health of her subjects. In this regard, the role in classical polytheism that Sister Maria Pimentel assigns to Hecate seems to mirror not only that of the Virgin Mary in the genesis and evolution of the Christian faith, but also the manner in which the Marian cult provided a platform and a space – albeit limited – in which women could begin to challenge masculine stereotypes and patriarchal structures in new ways.

### 1.6 The Virgin Mary and her entourage arrive at the wedding [folio 67]

Having used the testimonials of the four damsels to provide her readers with further information regarding the Virgin Mary’s character and qualities, Sister Maria Pimentel adds just two more stanzas, the first of which continues her description of Mary’s arrival at the wedding surrounded by her entourage:

<p>[52] Dos braços de marfim todas fizeram Um trono preciosíssimo quadrado E nela com aplauso receberam A virgem concebida sem pecado Com ela para as bodas se vieram Aonde todas quatro exercitaram Seus atos dando a Deus louvor e glória Como bem claramente diz a história.</p>	<p>Then their ivory arms entwined to form A precious bower and invite within To great applause that happy morn The virgin conceived without sin.<sup>22</sup> The damsels escorted her and performed Their sacred duties, singing hymns That praised God’s glory to the skies As Scripture plainly testifies.</p>
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The very final stanza of the section evokes Saint Jerome’s solemn guidance about how Christian women should conduct themselves:

<p>[53] Quem fosse o desposado de alta estima O texto soberano o não declara Mas quem teve ciência lá de cima Para deixar a igreja tão preclara</p>	<p>Who the esteemed bridegroom happened to be The sovereign text does not reveal But all whom heavenly wisdom receive Endow the Church with great appeal;</p>
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22. According to the apocryphal work *The Protoevangelium of James*, Mary was born as the result of a chaste embrace of relief and happiness between her parents, after an angel had announced an end to her mother Anne’s barrenness. In official Catholic dogma, the purpose of the immaculate conception was for Jesus to be born in human form without inheriting original sin.



Este que é São Jerônimo me anima  
(A dizer) porque diz ser cousa clara  
Que foi de Cristo o amado que é espelho  
Do virgíneo valor sol do evangelho.

The words of Saint Jerome embolden me<sup>23</sup>  
To say (though this should be what all do feel)  
It's our beloved Christ who is the fount  
Of truth in the Evangelist's account.

## Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding the heroic format and the unprecedented theme of Sister Maria Pimentel's epic, her poetry probably would have attracted positive rather than negative attention from her immediate superiors and from the specific authorities charged with evaluating religious texts for possible publication. The popularity of the Marian cult at the time, not only in religious terms but also as a symbol of rejection of Portugal's lost independence, of resistance to the power of the Spanish throne, as well as the political and social turbulence experienced during the years in which Sister Maria Pimentel was writing, are contextual factors without which the importance of her epic poetry cannot be accurately assessed.

Sister Maria Pimentel's decision to portray all four members of the Virgin Mary's entourage as Greek goddesses rather than their Roman counterparts<sup>24</sup> could be interpreted as part of an authorial strategy to obscure the precise identities of the damsels, whom many might simply have taken to be angelic attendants. Readers among both clergy and laity would not necessarily have been very familiar with all four of the deities: first, they were all women; second, while one is a better-known Olympian (the wise, somewhat androgynous, warrior-maiden Athena), Themis and Metis were Titaness precursors to the Olympian gods<sup>25</sup> and Hecate was neither Titan nor Olympian but a chthonic deity, a denizen of the underworld.

Once the Chorus of 'damsels' has been identified with a fair degree of certainty, it becomes clear that none of them plays the passive, often marginal, role typically assigned to many female Greek deities. Rather exceptionally, classical mythology has portrayed all four as immensely powerful and talented women in their own right, endowed with qualities comparable to those of Mary in the Christian Church, and all enjoying a reputation analogous to her in their own devotional contexts.

Our reading of the four sets of stanzas that give voice to each goddess in turn suggests that, while the qualities of each of the deities were sufficiently distinctive to allow a well-educated 17th century reader to identify them, some of their attributes, values and predispositions overlap. This partial superimposition reflects the differing divine genealogies proposed by classical writers, the degree of syncretism occurring with local religions as Mediterranean religious life was hellenised, the subsequent emergence and expansion of the Roman Empire and, later, the emergence of Christianity itself. Indeed, these intersections between

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23. In addition to Saint Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, Sister Maria Pimentel would have been familiar with his writings on how a devout Christian woman should conduct her life.

24. This can be readily confirmed by some details of the deities' symbology and the terms in which Sister Maria Pimentel had them describe their own attributes, qualities and spheres of intervention.

25. Perhaps Themis would have been more recognisable to readers in her Roman guise of *Justicia*; after Zeus 'subsumed' Metis, she is virtually absent from the mythological record.

divine attributes, and the fact that the goddesses remain anonymous throughout the text, may have been part of a deliberate strategy on Sister Maria Pimentel's part both to retain coherence in her portrayal of the Virgin's personality and purpose, and to provide a means of avoiding a too-detailed scrutiny by the organs of censorship at a crucial moment in Portugal's history.

Given her demonstrable knowledge of mythological and theological literature written in Latin, Sister Maria Pimentel was in an ideal position to select which goddesses she felt were most appropriate for the Virgin's entourage, with the aim of using them to symbolise and explore different aspects of Mary's personality and mission. Why Sister Maria Pimentel chose these specific goddesses for her poetic account of the wedding at Cana may be explained in part by the reading materials available to her during her early education and those she later found in the convent library; both these limiting factors would have strongly influenced which deities she felt competent to write about, and in what terms she was able to characterise each one of them. Clearly, she selected these four deities because, in their mythical exploits, they had exhibited qualities that she could use to develop readers' appreciation of the multifaceted nature of the Virgin Mary and the role she could play in their spiritual lives. Though there are several other common attributes that link some or all of the goddesses to Mary<sup>26</sup>, those particularly emphasised by Sister Maria Pimentel in her poetic presentation of the four deities include (i) the closeness of their relationship with the King of Heaven; (ii) their sense of justice and impartiality; (iii) their concern for mortal wellbeing; (iv) their foresight and prophetic capabilities; and (v) their knowledge and wisdom.

All four of these great female characters can be said to have enjoyed the closest of connections with Zeus, either through blood or marriage. Metis was his first wife, so intelligent that he literally absorbed her into his own being so that she could advise only him.<sup>27</sup> Themis was his second wife, his "wise counsellor" and the rational interpreter of divine law. Athena was his daughter, a goddess whose prudent approach to action and unrelenting commitment to reason allowed her to be simultaneously goddess of war and of wisdom. Hecate, according to some, was also fathered by Zeus<sup>28</sup>, who both feared and favoured this underworld deity who attained something akin to Great Goddess status before the early Christian Church judged her to symbolise only evil drives and outcomes.<sup>29</sup> These four deities, whose various attributes are ascribed metaphorically to the Virgin Mary, are not secondary or marginal figures in Greek mythology, but belong to the close circle that formed around the ruler of Olympus. By analogy, not only do Mary's qualities bear the imprimatur of Heaven, but her entourage symbolises the sanctity of Christ's female followers.

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26. For example, the importance of their virgin status: virginity was a requirement of performing oracular duties, as Themis had done before marrying Zeus; Athena eschewed relations with men by choice; and Hecate, too, in some interpretations, remained a virgin.

27. Or, depending upon which source is accepted, to frustrate a prophecy that their future son would be greater than his father.

28. That is, if Hecate is taken to be the daughter of Zeus and Asteria, rather than of Perses and Asteria.

29. Some goddesses were demonised (e.g. Hecate and Tyche, the goddess of chance, among others) because their attributes were deemed either incompatible with the values espoused by the founders of the Church or with those attributed to its growing constellation of saints. Other goddesses were 'domesticated' by the Church, but often at the cost of a change in their gender (Demeter/Demetrius and Nike/Nicholas) or being rebranded in some other way (as in Aphrodite's transition from love goddess to repentant whore).

In Sister Maria Pimentel's rendering of the Virgin Mary's arrival at the wedding, the two Titan goddesses, Themis and Metis, are portrayed as great advocates of justice and impartiality, principles they often stressed when guiding their husband Zeus away from intemperate actions, or when passing judgement on mortal transgressions. Athena, the daughter of Metis, also claims an interest in justice, holding it to be the foundation of mortal security and life; she, like her mother, values prudence over all else, appreciating the dangers of judging or acting with an excess of passion, instinct or haste and an absence of due reflection. By giving such heavy emphasis to justice and impartiality, Sister Maria Pimentel may have been contributing to the ongoing debate over the Marian cult by suggesting that praying for the Virgin Mary's intercession assured the faithful of greater equality before God than was possible via exclusive reliance on the confessional or on the bewilderingly complex communion of saints.

All four goddesses had some degree of responsibility for mortal wellbeing that extended far beyond the limits of their principal remits: Themis not only punished those who failed to properly observe custom and ritual but rewarded with prosperity those who did; one of Metis's duties was to safeguard people's health and general security; Hecate both bestowed prosperity on mortals and deprived them of it, according to their behaviour, and was a source of good luck for sailors and hunters; and even Athena, as the patron and protectress of Athens and other Greek cities, was committed to defending the welfare of large populations. Here, perhaps Sister Maria Pimentel is subtly hinting that women's caring nature, stereotypically limited to the home and immediate family, can and should be extended to the wider community.

All four deities are associated with foresight and/or the gift of prophecy: before becoming Zeus's second wife, Themis supervised oracular ceremonies at Delphi; the capacity of Metis to plan ahead required not only knowledge but foresight, even though she employed reason and logic rather than 'feminine intuition' or powers even more mystical; at the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, a temple was dedicated to Athena as *Athena Pronoia* (or *Pronaea*), an aspect of her character that could be translated as the "Athena of Foresight", implying that her wisdom could be tapped for predictive purposes<sup>30</sup>; and finally, Hecate was able to intervene proactively in the affairs of Heaven and Earth because she could see into people's souls, communicate with the dead, and used spells and potions for soothsaying purposes. In ancient Greece, while deities were deemed to preside over oracular pronouncements, it was left to the supplicant or to a priest to interpret (rightly or wrongly) predictions that were often ambiguous. While it is not surprising that Sister Maria Pimentel's damsels were endowed with prophetic powers, it should be noted that, in the context of oracular communication, the goddesses were closer to the source of the prophecy (in all likelihood Zeus) than the intermediary<sup>31</sup> who publicly pronounced it. Here, we have evidence of Sister Maria Pimentel giving agency to women in the divination process, rather than simply portraying them as some sort of divinely-manipulated avatar. It could even be argued that the role of the damsels in divination runs parallel to that of

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30. It could equally plausibly be translated as "Athena the first seen", as her temple was located at the very entrance to the oracle complex.

31. Typically, oracular pronouncements were made by virgin females— sometimes by choice, sometimes under duress, sometimes mentally disordered, or under the influence of mind-altering substances — acting as the passive mouthpieces of the gods.

the Virgin Mary after her Assumption, the main difference being that while mortals consciously took the initiative in seeking oracular guidance, Mary would appear unexpectedly to individuals in a vision whose purpose was to communicate an important message.

Finally, each deity is associated in one way or another with knowledge and its wise application: Themis, goddess of divine justice, was “The Lady of Good Counsel” and advisor to her husband Zeus, and represents impartiality in the poem; Metis continued to give prudent advice after her marriage to Zeus, and denotes reason; Athena, combining the wisdom and astuteness of her mother Metis, and the warlike traits of her father Zeus, perhaps representing prudence more than any of her colleagues; and Hecate, whose vast divine remit and prodigious occult skills<sup>32</sup> allowed her to see holistically and act with cosmic coherence, connotes in the poem what might be termed ‘vision’. In Sister Maria Pimentel’s verses, the centrality of knowledge and its wise application not only contradicts the misogynistic stereotype of women’s ostensibly inferior intellect, and excessive spontaneity and rashness, but also challenges the male presupposition of female weakness and perfidy that is rooted in the Biblical account of the role of Eve in the downfall of Man.

Though the four members of the entourage display mutual respect, as they read their self-penned testimonials, we become aware of a certain rivalry between them. Each makes a point of projecting herself as *prima inter pares* of the group, a posture that reflects the tensions that existed not only between their unique qualities but also how they used the attributes they shared. Plausibly, Sister Maria Pimentel intended her readers to reflect on the efforts required of the faithful if the qualities of the Virgin Mary (such as her purity, perfection and uniqueness, and her regal/divine status) and her spiritual functions (e.g. compassion, intercession, advocacy, interlocution) were to remain compatible and operate in harmony. It is unclear whether the author had the general religious context in mind or was thinking more specifically of Portugal’s ongoing existential crisis; in either case, an overarching and holistic perspective (as exemplified by Hecate and, to a lesser extent, by Athena) would be crucial if schisms within the Church and prolonged conflict between two Catholic nations were to be avoided.

As a result of Sister Maria Pimentel’s decision to foreground the Virgin Mary in terms of narrative development and characterisation – an option the authorities would have found relatively easy to condone – she was able not only to give greater strength, substance and texture to the Marian personality, which had already become a symbol of resistance against Spanish rule, but also to construct a vision of womanhood in general that subtly contradicted the male stereotypes of her time, thereby reinforcing the radical impact of her epic poetry as a whole.

While this option may have comforted many among her mainly female readership, there are only two circumstances – or so it appears to us – in which Sister Maria Pimentel’s enterprise would have avoided condemnation from the Church or the civil authorities, namely if the panel of assessors had been negligent and/or incompetent in the execution of their duties, or its members had been complicit in aiding the

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32. Namely, her knowledge of magic, of the healing and harmful properties of plants, of the secrets of the underworld, and her insights into the mortal soul and the memories of the dead.

publication of what could have been considered a subversive text. Among the clerics appointed to licence the book's publication and those who, in their prefatory texts, attested so enthusiastically to the quality and wholesomeness of her work, there were several whose power in the Holy Office and/or prestige as religious authors and poets was so great that any reservations regarding the panel's rigour or competence can be dismissed.<sup>33</sup>The possibility of complicity is more plausible, since final authorisation for any publication had to be given by the powerful and largely autonomous Abbot of Alcobaça, to whom all members of the Cistercian order to which the author belonged owed allegiance and whose appointment, since 1587, had ceased to be a royal sinecure.

This leaves but one explanation, namely that Sister Maria Pimentel's work was indeed judged to be consistent with Church teachings (as the text of the licence makes clear) and, while it may have surprised some of the assessors that the Virgin Mary had been given almost as much prominence as Jesus in the epic work, they would have been quick to appreciate the political value of an authorial decision that provided a stirring evocation of the Virgin Mary and a source of inspiration to all Portugal in the years immediately before the successful coup against Spanish rule.

It remains unclear how conscious the assessors were of Sister Maria Pimentel's wider foregrounding of the feminine in her verses, but they probably understood that in order to extend and deepen the characterisation of the Virgin Mary she would need to employ a literary device of some sort. As we have seen, her strategy was to introduce four characters from Greek mythology in order to symbolize and explore different aspects of the Mary's personality and purpose. While this was an admirable device to achieve her literary objective, she seems to have deliberately selected four deities, Themis, Metis, Athena and Hecate, because they possessed in varying proportions all or some of those attributes (impartiality, wisdom, courage, prudence and an overarching vision) through which a subtle message could also be sent to her readers, namely that women had much more to offer the world than meek compliance. Sister Maria Pimentel's verses repeatedly stress that women, in spite of labouring under the weight of original sin, have a capacity for knowledge, responsibility and authority equal to any man's and that, by harnessing and applying these competencies, Eve's disobedience could be redeemed, and women could forge a more appropriate and relevant place for themselves in the world. It may even be the case that, using an unmistakable metaphor for female subordination in general and more particularly for the hegemony of Spain's Saint James over Portugal's Saint Mary, the Cistercian nun was sending a message to those contemplating open defiance against what many regarded as an ongoing Spanish occupation.

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33. For example, Sebastião César de Meneses was a prominent cleric, Inquisitor, politician, diplomat and poet. Both Dâmaso da Apresentação and Gaspar dos Reis were members of the Supreme Council of the Holy Office (i.e. the Inquisition), while Teodósio de Lucena (a specialist in philosophy) was one of its many Censors and Diogo Osório de Castro also appears to have been an Inquisitor. On the panel, Arsénio da Paixão, formerly Abbot of Alcobaça on two occasions, represented the Cistercian monastery to which all members of the order owed allegiance (Silva 2014, p. 24; Vilela 2017, p.72).

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