

Enrique Jardiel Poncela's *Eleven Thousand Virgins*: A Burlesque Rendition of the Don Juan Theme

Jorge Marbán, College of Charleston

The Don Juan theme has inspired an extraordinarily large number of interpretations in Western literature since the publication of Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla* in 1630. Tirso's play deals with two legends of different origin which he unites in his work. One is the legend of the daring man who mocks a statue or a skull which later shows up to confront him. The second source is represented by different accounts about seducers of women, a part of the oral or literary tradition of Spain and other European countries.

An important erosion of the original myth was accomplished by the Spaniard José de Zorrilla when he published *Don Juan Tenorio* 1844. Tirso's Don Juan goes to hell after dying as an unrepentant seducer and transgressor of the religious code. He does not fall in love with any of his female victims. Zorrilla, on the other hand, has his character fall in love with Doña Inés, and allows him to attain salvation through a last minute act of contrition. Shortly after the publication of Zorrilla's play, the story of the punishment of Don Juan by the statue disappears from the successive interpretations of Tirso's original work: "The romantic legend of Don Juan becomes a problem of sexual biology beginning with the middle of the XIXth century. In 1886, with Hayem, the word *donjuanismo* appears, indicating, thus, the transformation of the legend from an original literary myth to a modality of human love."¹

One of the most interesting re-elaborations of the Don Juan theme in the present century is represented by the novel written in 1930 by the Spanish humorist Enrique Jardiel Poncela: *¿Pero hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes?* (Were There Ever Eleven Thousand Virgins?).² Jardiel Poncela's work is in fact a burlesque rendition of the Don Juan theme. The object of his parody is, for the most part, José de Zorrilla's play. Zorrilla's play opens in the *Hostería del Laurel* in Seville, a tavern where Don Juan and Luis de Mejía, his rival in feminine conquests and misdeeds, have come to determine who has won the bet they made a year to that day. When an account is taken, it shows that Don Luis killed twenty-three men in duels and seduced fifty-six women while Don Juan eliminated thirty-two and seduced seventy-two.³

There is a similar scene in *Eleven Thousand Virgins*. Don Pedro de Valdivia, this novel's Don Juan, meets Vivola Adamant at Claridge, a nightclub in Madrid. Vivola, a seducer of men, has met with Valdivia, a seducer of women, with the hope of finding a solution to her profound disillusionment and

¹ Gregorio Marañón, *Don Juan, Ensayo sobre el origen de una leyenda* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1967), 86-7. All translations are mine.

² Enrique Jardiel Poncela, *¿Pero hubo alguna vez once mil vírgenes?* (Mexico: Editorial Latinoamericana, 1964). All translations are mine, all references are to this edition.

³ Juan Zorrilla, *Don Juan Tenorio* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957) 26-27.

satiety after many years of unrestrained lustful behavior. Claridge is a place as boisterous as Don Juan's surroundings in Zorrilla's play. Noise and smoke are overwhelming. Valdivia's description of the place is brutally humorous: ". . . an elegant nightclub where imbeciles get smashed, whores dance, and graduates from jail serve drinks, while a group of cannibalistic Negroes play the fox-trot" (64).

The number of conquests by Zorrilla's Don Juan are prodigiously magnified in Jardiel's novel. In nineteen years of debauchery, Valdivia has bedded no fewer than 36,857 women. In the same manner that Don Juan excels over Don Luis, Vivola excels over Valdivia, for she has bedded 37,329 men (67). In Scene XII of Zorrilla's play, Don Juan boasts: "From a Royal princess/to a fisherman's daughter/Ah, all social scales/my love has reached!" (Zorrilla 27). Valdivia brags in similar fashion: ". . . during twenty years, by land, water and air, by train, car, motorboat, ocean liner and airplane, I have sucked the lips of females of all latitudes, temperaments, and climates" (68). Vivola's counterpart follows: ". . . how could I list the number of white, yellow, red, olive and copper-skinned men who fell into my arms . . . Just imagine that I have heard myself gaspingly called my beautiful one in sixty different languages" (76).

Jardiel's mockery of Zorrilla does not stop there. In Zorrilla's drama, Don Juan seduces a novice in a convent. Valdivia includes among his conquests a Mother Superior and two nuns. Finally, while Zorrilla's Don Juan falls in love with Doña Inés because of her pure and loving soul and attains salvation through her, Valdivia is bewitched by a corrupt woman whose disdain for him ultimately leads him to commit suicide.

The use of burlesque presents some potential problems to a writer. As David Worcester states, "burlesque offers the greatest freedom to the artist and exacts the most from him in terms of creative invention. Burlesque is imitative, it is true, yet the imitation goes no deeper than surface and form. . . . Unless the author has skill in creating original incidents, the work is likely to drag."⁴

Jardiel shows in *Eleven Thousand Virgins* the kind of imagination needed to prevent boredom in his readers. He is resourceful and skillful in his humorous approach. The Don Juan theme has been traditionally developed in the theater. In writing his novel, Jardiel makes good use of the possibilities offered by a work which is to be read and not performed. Frequent footnotes identify imaginary books, and there are numerous quotes attributed to the most unlikely sources. Jardiel also inserts dialogues between himself and a fictitious reader in order to exploit several humorous angles.

Jardiel's novel was written at the time in which the Vanguard movement had made strides in literature with the original use of printed signs. Drawings, signs, and mathematical equations appear often in *Eleven Thousand Virgins*. When one character yells out, the letters A and Y representing the Spanish interjection occupy half of the corresponding page (88). The conversation of another character hiding under a bed is printed upside down (146-49). These

⁴ David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960) 49.

graphic techniques are an important means of maintaining the reader's interest throughout the 321 pages of this novel.

Exaggeration is another frequent device in which the use of precise figures contributes greatly to the intended ludicrous effect. A poker match has been going on with only short interruptions for more than thirty-one years (51-52). Valdivia receives an average of 60,590 letters from female admirers every year (54). Near the end of his life, Valdivia starts vomiting a red liquid. His doctor reveals the source of this condition. He estimates that Valdivia received 3,708,800 kisses during his life and stored close to four kilos of rouge inside his stomach (296).

Eleven Thousand Virgins abounds in unusual aphorisms, bizarre similes, and odd metaphors. For example: "Love is like mayonnaise: once it turns sour you have to throw it out and get another one" (163); "Women are men's spurs and men are women's jockeys" (205); "Life is not equitable but it is equestrian" (205); "In love second editions lead to disaster" (163); "The gentlemanly spirit of Spaniards consists in treating women as if they were whores and then talking about them as if they were models of virtue" (114).

The novel is also filled with ironic situations and developments. One twist is that Valdivia's admirer, Luis Campsa, by using the same techniques he learned from his mentor, is able to conquer Vivola in ten minutes (289). Valdivia's first failure is also due, in great part, to ironic fate. During the first night he meets Vivola in Madrid, Valdivia is about to make her surrender when his car plunges into a ditch, thwarting his plans as a result. During the final encounter of the two characters, Vivola, who has announced her desire to yield to Valdivia, rejects him after finding out that he has just shaved the beard she thought he had grown in order to impress her (275). The prospective heirs of a rich old Marquis, who was planning to marry Vivola, had hired Valdivia and brought him to Nice with the hope of preventing the marriage. The final ironic twist is provided by the fact that the poison the heirs had given the Marquis hours before the wedding takes its fatal effect just ten minutes after the conclusion of the ceremony (288-89).

Jardiel Poncela's choice of the Don Juan theme for his third novel should be understood in the context of his other novels. The erotic novel, as Paul Seaver Jr. points out, was very popular in Spain during the first three decades of this century.⁵ According to Seaver, Jardiel's first two novels are in fact works which satirize the "trite themes and topics of the erotic-adventure novels and their deformed and absurd vision of life" (112). On the other hand, Jardiel's fourth and last novel published in 1932, *La Tournée de Dios*, is a vitriolic attack on the hypocrisy of society and the religious establishment.

Jardiel Poncela, the satirist of erotic novels, was an avid reader of the genre, in the same fashion that Cervantes, the avowed enemy of romances of chivalry, was well acquainted with them. Jardiel amuses himself, just as Cervantes does, with the adventures and misadventures of the protagonist of

⁵ Paul J. Seaver Jr, "La primera época humorística de Enrique Jardiel Poncela 1927-36," diss. University of Maryland 1980, 114.

his novel. But a careful reading of *Eleven Thousand Virgins* reveals a pessimistic tone which clearly fails to produce a cheerful impact on the reader. In this novel Jardiel unleashes his satirical whip against all modes of occupations and types of people: loose women, prudes, male seducers, doctors, newspapermen, waiters, band players, comedians, and gamblers, among others. He ridicules the platitudes of romantic love, the delights of matrimony, biblical stories and the sacred tenets of Catholicism, the scientific theories of Gregorio Marañón, the profusion of essays about Don Juan, the delights of the countryside, and the political and economic atmosphere of Communist Russia.

In the preface to *Eleven Thousand Virgins*, Jardiel Poncela himself justifies the vision of mankind and the brand of humor conveyed in his works: "Without faith in men and things, realizing clearly how false and fragile everything is, lacking a suitable remedy to cure ourselves from this innate fatigue that ails us, which is probably the burden of four thousand years of bestial deeds recorded in history and gravitating upon our heads, what else can be asked of those of us born into this utilitarian, selfish, and ferocious era with no other signs of greatness than those provided by the advances of technology? (13).

At the end of his novel, Jardiel refers to an ancient document which describes the plight of eleven thousand virgins in Germany in the year 383 (320-21). The title of Jardiel's novel becomes revealing when related to an earlier episode in its plot. Valdivia responds to his butler's suggestion to marry a virgin by saying that he has found many varieties of women. Nevertheless, he confesses: "I have not found a single virgin, Ramón, and I am beginning to believe that they never existed" (298).

Before he met Vivola, Valdivia had made the seduction of women his goal in life. His erotic career was a means to avenge his uncle Felix, who had been killed by a rejected lover. By the time he meets his female counterpart, Valdivia is tired of his life of debauchery. Vivola's rejection would not have brought about his ruin if he had been able to believe, as his butler did, in the existence of virgins. Valdivia's quandary appears to reflect, therefore, the pessimistic views of his creator.

The eleven thousand virgins are ultimately symbols of the ideals and virtues which the writer finds lacking in the societies created by human beings since the beginning of history. Jardiel's novel is not only a successful and brilliant display of humoristic techniques, but also the projection of the author's nihilistic and devastating view of mankind. Jardiel's Valdivia joins the ranks of literary Don Juans as another victim in the Darwinian struggle of life, and an accomplished product of the power of creativity of one of the most talented humorists in the history of Spanish literature.