

Playing Cards with God: The Visions of the Portuguese Nun, Mariana da Purificação (1623–95)

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Of the many attributes the Christian tradition could ascribe to God — omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness — the ability to play (and enjoy) cards is scarcely the most common. This trait is first attributed to him in the texts of the seventeenth-century visionary mystic, Mariana da Purificação. The Portuguese nun, who was born in the Lisbon borough of São Nicolau in 1623, was the daughter of a jewelry maker of Old Christian blood — that is, having no Muslim or Jewish ancestry. At home, she was taught to read, write, and sew. Later, she moved to Beja, near the border with Castile, to join the Carmelite order at the Convento de Nossa Senhora da Esperança, probably because her brother was a chaplain there. Mariana became widely known for her asceticism, which included intervals of hermit life and frequent self-flagellation. She was also known for her mystical visions of Christ, the Virgin, the Holy Family, and of certain saints, such as Teresa of Ávila and Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins, as well as for her special devotion to Christ's side wound. She died in 1695 in a state of holiness, her body incorrupt.

Mariana was the author of a ninety-folio autobiographical text composed as spiritual guide.¹ At times she states that she is writing in the year 1674, and at others, in 1694. The text dated in the 1670s is written in the form of a notebook

¹ Mariana da Purificação, *Vida da Venerável Madre Mariana da Purificação* (Biblioteca Pública do Município de Évora, c. 1600 Cod. CV 1–20).

(*caderno*),² which was circulated and widely read within her convent. Her visions and revelations came under suspicion of the Holy Office, which began an inquisitional process between 1668 and 1672.³ This process, however, did not conclude that she was a heretic or a “fake saint.” An autobiographical account was included in these proceedings as part of her testimony.⁴

The life and writings of Mariana da Purificação have attracted critical attention from her lifetime until today. In 1747, Friar Caetano do Vencimento published the first biography of Mariana.⁵ In his forty-five chapters, Vencimento attempted to recover Mariana’s words and consolidate her veneration in order to pave the way for her beatification. In 1802, following the canonization of the Italian saint, Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi (another Carmelite), Friar Miguel de Azevedo, in his biography of the nun, continued the efforts to have Rome grant sainthood to Mariana.⁶

These hagiographic works were very important for Mariana’s public recognition, but, as with any hagiography, they offered a careful selection of the nun’s accounts of her practices and thoughts, placing her within the parameters of conventional female saints. Miguel de Azevedo’s account, for example, focused on the following categories: poverty of spirit, heroic obedience, angelic purity, spiritual inwardness, ardent charity, living faith, mental and vocal prayer, and deep humility. Contemporary scholarship on Mariana has focused almost exclusively on these biographical texts. The exceptions are literary historians, whose interest in female authors and their writings has led them to analyze the manuscript of

² The use of *cadernos* is also seen in the writings of other religious women of her time, for instance, the Portuguese Cistercian nun Joana de Jesus. See Joana Serrado, “Ancias/Anxiousness in Joana de Jesus (1617–1681): Historical and Philosophical Perspectives,” Ph.D. diss., University of Groningen, 2014.

³ *Processo da Religiosa Mariana da Purificação* (Lisboa: Arquivo Nacional Torre de Tombo, 1668–72, MS 1720).

⁴ Leonardo Coutinho de Carvalho Rangel, *Nos braços do Divino Esposo: santidade feminina no Portugal do século XVII e a trajetória de Madre Mariana da Purificação*, Encontro Nacional de Jovens Investigadores (Porto: Universidade do Porto, 2015).

⁵ Fr. Caetano do Vencimento, *Fragmentos da Prodígiosa Vida* (Lisboa: António da Silva, 1747).

⁶ Fr. Miguel de Azevedo, *Memorial das instrutivas palavras e edificantes obras da muito virtuosa Madre Mariana da Purificação* (Lisboa: Simão Tadeu Ferreira, 1802).

Mariana's life in light of such issues as autobiographical literary genre, constructions of holiness as/and authorship.⁷

Mariana's autobiographical text is inserted within a 177-folio manuscript archived in the municipal library of Évora, Portugal. This book was most certainly intended as a devotional guide for the convent to provide a model of spiritual behavior and theological formation for new generations of nuns. The first twenty-three pages were written by her confessor, Fr. António de Escobar (1617–81), and entitled *Enformação* (Information). He offers a synopsis of the miraculous aspects of Mariana's life, concluding with the testimonies of the Holy Office. The second document (fol. 24–28) is a letter written by Mariana's niece, Teresa de Jesus Maria, who was also a nun at the convent. This letter was addressed to Mariana's sister and her husband (Teresa's parents), describing the holy death of the Carmelite nun. There follows an image of the venerable Juana Rodriguez de Jesus Maria, a Poor Clare from Burgos, Spain, famous for her stigmata.⁸ The fourth document is a letter written by Mariana herself, during her *Deserto* (desert), or seclusion, addressed to her fellow nuns encouraging them in their religious life (fol. 29–31). The rest of the 140 folios comprising the text were presumably written in 1694, just before her death. In these writings she uses the formula "*obrigada por mandado e obediência*" (obliged by duty and obedience).⁹

The Portuguese word for cards is the same as that for letters — *cartas*. This polysemy is crucial, since throughout the manuscript there are several transmissions of *cartas*: the confessor's to the Inquisition, the niece's to the relatives, Mariana's to the community, and Mariana's to the confessor. These letters negotiate the ascetic, the miraculous, and the divine — within the Counter-Reformation tradition, the means that constituted the path to sanctity and female virtue. In addition to the several unified voices arranging a regulated, saintly way of life, the

⁷ Mafalda Maria Féris Cunha, "A Fiel e Verdadeira relação que dá dos sucessos de sua vida a Criatura Mais Ingrata a Seu Creador . . . : Um género, um texto único" (Master's thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1992). Isabel Allegro de Magalhães et al., "Literatura de conventos autoria feminina," *Boletim Cultural da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian: História e antologia da Literatura Portuguesa. Século XVIII*, 32 (Aug. 2005): 7–98; Zulmira Santos, coord. Paula Mendes e Inês Nemésio, *Fontes para o Estudo da Santidade em Portugal*, Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar Cultura, Espaço e Memória (Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2013).

⁸ Isabelle Poutrin, *Le voile et la plume. Autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1995), 177–80.

⁹ Sonja Herpoel, *A la zaga de santa Teresa: autobiografias por mandato* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 220–21.

theological depiction of God is expressed indirectly through Mariana's mystical experience itself. After she describes her ailments and relates that she was confined to bed suffering from bleeding, Christ appears to her as a pre-pubescent boy, comforting and embracing her tenderly, and nursing her through her pain. She tells how Christ always acted sweetly and with a mischievousness that made her laugh and entertained her. In folio 50, Mariana continues her depiction of the divine attributes — enhancing her personal relationship with Christ — in the tradition of bridal or affective mysticism inspired by the *Song of Songs*.¹⁰ Once, when her illness prevented her from joining the community, she took refuge in her prayer to an image of the Christ-child, who spoke to her. Mariana describes to her confessor, whom she calls "Father," the dialogue she had with Christ:

My Spouse, however, not pleased with my having His image there, came to me Himself and said:

"Mariana. You miss receiving me [in person]. I am not here granting you the favors I usually grant when you receive me."

I responded:

"My soul, my goodness, and all my love: all these I experience, although I myself am so ungrateful to You. But I miss searching for You on my own and receiving You in my poor soul, so that You may enrich it with Your grace and Your pure and fine love."

Who could give even a limited account, or make you understand in some way, Father, with some insight, the love, tender gestures, and grace with which He [Christ] has said to me:

"You, daughter of my heart, [should] play cards. If you win you may take Communion tomorrow."

At this, I broke out laughing, because I did not even know how to play, nor would [the nuns] let me go downstairs, as I was bleeding. I

¹⁰ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

was sure that I would not be allowed to go [to Communion], even if I were to win.

“I shall teach you to win,” He said to me gracefully. “I shall give you strength to go downstairs. If your confessor will not give you his permission, it will be his fault, not mine. Come, let us play,” He said again, “to see who shall win.”

He won the first round. And I said:

“Did I not tell You, [my] love, that I knew not how to play? What happens now? What can I give You as a reward? Shall I give You my hardened heart? That is only fair, though I have been giving it to You all along. Now I give it to You again so that, in such pain for having offended You, You may hold it tight and set it ablaze with Your divine love.”

He became very happy, as if He were not the lord of everything. Fooling around with me, he said to me that, if I wanted to win, I should play again, and playing again, I won without knowing how to play.¹¹

¹¹ “Mas não se contentou meu esposo com eu ter ali a sua imagem se não ueyo elle mesmo e dice me: Marianna estás com saudades de me receber. Não te faço eu aqui os fauores que te faço quando me recebes. Respondi lhe eu: Minha alma, meu bem, e todo o meu amor: bem expirimento tudo isso, sendo-uos tão ingrata, mas tenho grandes saudades de uos ir eu mesma buscar e receber uos em minha pobre alma para ma inriqueceres de uossa graça e de uosso puro, e fino amor.

Quem pudera pudera sequer em parte rellatar ou de algum modo dar a entender a Uossa Paternidade com algua noticia o amor, carícia, e graça com que me dice - que - *tu filha do meu coração jogar as cartas então se tu ganhares irás amenhaa comungar.*

Neste passo me ri eu muito porque eu nem sabia jogar, nem me hauiam deixar ir abaxo estando sangrada. De eu poder ir não duuidaua de me deixarem ir ainda que ganhasse. *A ganhar te ensinarey eu*, me disse com muita graça, *eu darey forças para irez! se o teu confessor te não der licença sua será a culpa e não minha! Ora uá, jugamos*, me tornou a dizer, *para uer quem ganha*. Da 1ª uez ganhou elle, e eu dice-lhe *não uos dezia eu amor que não sabia jogar? agora como ha de ser? que uos hey de dar de ganho dar uos hey o meu duro coração; que so isso he rezão supposto que uo-llo tenho dado já de todo agora uo-llo torno a dar para que com hua dor de uos ter tanto offendido apartaes, e abrazaes em uosso diuino amor?* Ficou muito contante como que se não fora elle Senhor de tudo e, brincando comigo, me tornou a dizer que para eu ganhar hauia de jogar outra ues, e tornando a jogar ganhej eu sem saber jogar.”

This passage is very revealing, for it both documents the social custom of card-playing in Portuguese society, and demonstrates the God-Child and Mariana's spiritual relationship as a game of chance. During the seventeenth century, the popular Spanish card game, *Ombre*, was referred to in numerous publications.¹² *Ombre* derives from the Spanish word *hombre*, or man; in this context, it means the highest bidder or player. Instead of the old custom of abiding by the last card flipped over as trump, *Ombre* proposes that players bid to name the trump suit. The game was usually played by three players, and the winner was the player who took the most tricks. *Ombre* became famous throughout Europe: Catherine of Braganza, Charles II's Portuguese queen consort, is believed to have introduced the game in England. Later, Alexander Pope (1688–1744) immortalized the game in the poem "The Rape of The Lock." A satire of a young girl's trivial, quotidian life, the poem also describes the several hands of *Ombre* that Belinda must endure before she wins against the Baron and Sir Anonym with a King of Hearts.¹³

Mariana da Purificação's vision also has moral and theological consequences for the nun. The immediate resistance the Church might have to the possibility of the incarnated divinity showing himself in a mundane, even immoral activity — as a mere player of a game of cards — could trigger suspicion and dismay. Although the eighteenth-century religious writer, Manuel Bernardes, praises Mariana by quoting the above passage in the fourth volume of his collection, *Nova Floresta*, in the fifth volume, he warns against the moral perils of playing cards.¹⁴ Other spiritual authors, such as Friar Francisco da Anunciação in his *Vindícias da Virtude* (1725), condemn the immorality of card games, a position that da Anunciação grounds on previous condemnations by the Council of Trent and the Portuguese Ordinances.¹⁵

¹² *The Royal Game of the Ombre Written at the Request of divers Honourable Persons* (London: Thomas Palmer, at the Crown in Westminster-Hall, 1665). See also David Parlett, *A Dictionary of Card Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹³ Henry Huck Gibbs, *The Game of Ombre* (London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1902), 81–82. On Pope, see Donald W. Nichol, ed., *Anniversary Essays on Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Manuel Bernardes, *Nova Floresta ou Sylva de varios apophthegmas e ditos sentenciosos, espirituales e moraes* (Lisboa Ocidental: José António da Sylva, 1726/1728), 4:59–65; 5:414–15.

¹⁵ Fernanda Frazão, *Fontes para a História dos Jogos em Portugal* (Lisboa: Apenas, 2012), 110–14. This work is a crucial bibliographical source of historical transcriptions related to Portuguese practices and games.

The nature of God is at stake as well. With knowledge acquired through visual communication, Mariana is also reflecting upon the nature of God, who here is present in his Trinitarian form, through Christ's humanity, as the Son incarnate.¹⁶ Contrary to what is revealed in Scripture, and closer to the description given by apocryphal sources, Christ appears to Mariana as a playful pre-pubescent.¹⁷ This little boy (*minino*) reproaches her for relying on a mediated image instead of engaging directly with him. He acknowledges and empathizes with Mariana's suffering for being deprived of Communion — his sacramental body — and invites her to play cards, betting himself on the outcome of the game. Mariana's emphasis on the Eucharist derives directly from promulgations of the Council of Trent against the Protestant reformers, defending the doctrine of transubstantiation (the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine), against the Protestant belief in consubstantiation (its symbolism or representation).¹⁸ In her narrative, Mariana states that Christ, in his youth, is present to administer and offer himself. Later in the text, the Virgin Mary appears to her, attesting to this personal and mystical communion (fol. 52). The directness and privacy of the administration of Christ's body puts at risk the monopoly held by male clerics, which Trent also intended to safeguard.¹⁹ The sacrament of the Eucharist offers to Mariana and to other early modern Portuguese mystics, both female and male, and in tradition of medieval visionaries, the primary possibility of achieving their ecstatic and mystical encounters.²⁰

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)," vol. 4, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 350–61.

¹⁷ Stephen J. Davis, *Christ Child: Cultural Memories of a Young Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3–19.

¹⁸ For an English translation, see "The Thirteenth Session," *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 75–91.

¹⁹ On Trent as regards the Eucharist and sacramental theology in general, see Peter Walter, "Sacraments in the Council of Trent and Sixteenth-Century Catholic Theology," *Oxford Handbooks Online*, [http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2067/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199659067-e-30](http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2067/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199659067.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199659067-e-30); and Trent Pomplun, "Post-Tridentine Sacramental Theology," *Oxford Handbooks Online* <http://ezproxyprd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2067/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199659067.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199659067-e-8>. (accessed February 07, 2017). See also Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1992).

²⁰ See the two classic (and opposing) perspectives on the Portuguese case in Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira, "Mística portuguesa em êxtases de amor perante a Sagrada Eucaristia," *Primeiro Congresso Eucarístico Nacional*, 2–7 Julho de 1924 (Braga: Acção Católica, 1924),

In addition to Mariana's gaining access to the sacrament of the Eucharist, what is at stake here is the exchange of hearts and of bodies, this time, however, by means of a game of cards. Yet the game is not a competition, but a skill that the divinity teaches his human opponent. Despite the lesson, Mariana fails to profit and complains about her loss and her inability to give Christ anything in return. In this passage, she exchanges her hardened heart (*coração duro*) with Christ. This mystical *topos* evokes the female mysticism of the medieval Helfta community, which was influential on early modern Iberian spirituality.²¹

During Mariana and Christ's communication, her body continues to bleed, while his body represents the perfection of childhood and contentment. This youthful perfection is evinced in the polysemy of the word *graça* (grace): Christ teaches her how to play and how to win, full of grace and amusement, which makes her laugh and enjoy his company. His childlike way of convincing her by making a request and granting her the authority that neither her confessor nor her community had given her, makes her a graceful accomplice in their private game. Christ almost forgets his divine nature by surrendering himself to total joy: "He became very happy, as if He were not the lord of everything."

Despite having won, the God-Child asks Mariana to play again. This time, Mariana uses two words: to fool around (*brincar*), and to play (*jogar/jugar*).²² Christ is fooling around with her (*brincando*) by showing that she can win without knowing how to play (*jogar*), by breaking the rules, and by being receptive to his tricks, his demands, and his whims.

To conclude, the writings of Mariana da Purificação, a seventeenth-century Carmelite nun from Beja, provide a glimpse into engaged female religiosity. This engagement or consciousness is expressed by means of the narrative of devotional practices and acquired knowledge through visions and colloquies with the Christ-Child. Her accounts not only contribute to our understanding of culture and gender in early modern Portugal, they also provide a model for a sacramental theology in which the game of cards is a window to the mystical experience of

130–50; and Silvio Lima, "Amor Místico (1935)," *Obras Completas* (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2002), 1:677–97.

²¹ José Adriano Freitas de Carvalho, *Gertrudes de Helfta em Espanha: Contribuição para o estudo da história da espiritualidade peninsular nos sécs. XVI e XVII* (Porto: Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, 1981).

²² "Brincar," *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press. <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:6910/translate/portuguese-english/brincar> (accessed February 07, 2017).

the divine. For Mariana and her twenty-first-century readership, God is betting — taking his chances — with human- (and woman-) kind. And both win.