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Carmela Mattza

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A Stage is on Fire. Elisabeth of Bourbon and the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve*

Carmela V. Mattza

The deep affection Elisabeth of Bourbon (later known as Queen Isabel of Bourbon), the French princess who married future King Philip IV of Spain¹, had for plays based on Greek and Roman mythological stories and her preference for spectacles that included machines and special effects were not a secret². It was part of an aesthetic that aimed to provide a feast for both the eyes of the body and of the mind. This taste was forged in the court of Marie de Medici, her mother, where she not only witnessed but also participated in luxurious festivities. This lavish experience at the French court, which put on stage an exuberant iconography of authority and power, is what Isabel sought to implement at the Spanish court and this article aims to offer a glimpse of this process. Thus, this study focuses on Elisabeth's participation in the *Ballet de Madame*, also called *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve*, staged in 1615 to celebrate the double marriages of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria, Infanta of Spain, and Crown Prince of Spain Philip to Elisabeth herself. In particular, this study analyzes to what degree princess Elisabeth's participation in it encourages and influences the use on stage of allegories of water and fire into the Spanish *Fiesta* that she herself called in 1622 to celebrate the birthday of Philip IV.

Thanks to an account by Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza, we know that Queen Isabel was responsible for directing and supervising this *Fiesta* that took place in Aranjuez. Thus, Mendoza's account, *Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez*, constitutes a privileged platform which we can use to reconstruct both the extent and the limits of the aesthetic criteria of the young Queen and her influence on the Spanish-Golden-Ages-Stage of the day.

My argument has two parts. First, I focus on the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* to analyze the presence of candles and mythological figures on stage as they became part of an iconography that offers a symbolism for power and authority by stressing the figures of flames (*flammeux*) or fire and occasionally of water or rivers. Second, I focus on *Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez* to highlight the role that Queen Isabel had in it as director in order to show how her 1615 experience in Paris influenced and shaped many of the features found in *La Fiesta de Aranjuez*, in particular in the play, *La Gloria de Niquea*, since *El Vellochino de Oro*, the other play staged during this two-day festival, was not directed by her but by Leonor de Pimentel, a lady in the court of Philip IV³.

1 Born in 1600 as Élisabeth de Bourbon and also known as Elisabeth of France, she was the first daughter of Henri IV and Marie de Medici. She married Crown Prince Philip in 1615 and moved to Madrid later that same year. In 1622, after the death of King Philip III, his son, Phillip IV was crowned King of Spain and Élisabeth became Queen Isabel de Borbón.

2 For details, see Carmela V. Mattza, 'A Stage for Isabel de Borbón: From Paris to Aranjuez', in Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero (eds), *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theaters*, New York, Routledge, coll. « Transculturalisms », 2017, p. 153-170.

3 For details, see Frank A. Domínguez, 'Philip IV's Fiesta de Aranjuez, Part I: The Marriage of Cosimo II de Medici to María Magdalena de Austria and Leonor Pimentel', *Hispanófila*, 157, 2009, p. 39-62.

Elisabeth of Bourbon and the *Ballet de cour*

The ballet de cour, a genre born in the French court, emphasizes the collective and collaborative work which, led by a poet, brings together the four arts, poetry, painting, music and choreography, to create a harmonious spectacle⁴. The *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve*⁵ took place on March 19, 1615, in the Great Hall of the Petit-Bourbon (in front of the Louvre) to celebrate the wedding of Elisabeth of Bourbon and Crown Prince Philip. It was organized by Queen Marie de Medici and today it is considered a masterpiece of the ballet de cour⁶.

Marie de Medici set high standards for this ballet⁷. She was the patron and the director of this dance, i.e., "she selected the princes, princesses, ladies and nobles who took part in it"⁸ and requested that Étienne Durand take care of selecting the rest of the dancers, the dances, poetry and the music as well as the composition and harmony to accompany all the characters and allegories as they enter and perform on stage. A young poet at that time, René Bordier helped Durand to produce this spectacle where verses by François de Malherbe were recited⁹. Tommaso Francini, an Italian fountain engineer, debuted in a double role for this ballet¹⁰. He was a stage designer and technician who made one of his trademarks the incorporation of his own fountain spectacles within the designs of the ballets¹¹. It was his art and creativity that made possible the constant transformation of the stage with chariots, machines, special effects and displays that the *Ballet de Madame-Le Triomphe de Minerve* emphasized in order to bring as apotheosis and ending, the

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- 4 Margaret McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour en France (1581-1643)*, Paris, CNRS, coll. « Le Chœur des muses », 1963, p. 23.
 - 5 In 1868, Paul Delacroix's accounts on the ballets and mascarades de cour performed under Henri IV and Louis XIII were published. Among these was found the account *The Ballet of Madame, The Triumph of Minerva*. There are other accounts describing the festivity but they appeared either in private correspondence or as part of a larger narrative related to ballet criticism. For details, see M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet de cour en France*, *op. cit.* When making reference to the anonymous account, I will be citing from both Paul Delacroix's account and also from the partial English translation found in *Description du Ballet de Madame, The Triumph of Minerva* reproduced in William Howarth (ed.), *French Theater in the Neo-Classical Era, 1550-1789*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, coll. « Theatre en Europe », 1992, p. 95-99. Part of this account is also paraphrased by Louis Batiffol in his *Marie de Medicis and the French Court in the xviii Century* [1906], ed. Henry William Carless Davis, London, Chatto & Windus, 1908.
 - 6 Christopher Smith, 'Part I: 1550-1630', in W. Howarth (ed), *French Theater...*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
 - 7 '[This] ballet which in the richness of the presentation of its theme should not only surpass all that had been done in the past in like entertainments but should by the same token deny to the future all hope of accomplishing anything of a like standard [...] Their majesties summoned those whose reputations gave the most confidence in their capacity', L. Batiffol, *Marie de Medicis...*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
 - 9 François de Malherbe wrote odes for public official events but also verses for court festivities. 'He was admitted to court circles during the final years of Henri IV's and the early years of Louis XIII's', Ch. Smith, 'Part I...', *art. cit.*, p. 91. In one of his letters, he describes the ballet *The Minerva* as 'so fine and magnificent that cures any temptation to work as such things again in the future', quoted in Ch. Smith (*ibid.*).
 - 10 For details see John McDowell, *The Renaissance Stage: Documents of Serlio, Sabbattini and Furtenbach*, ed. Barnard W. Hewitt, Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, 1958. See also Thomas E. Lawrenson, *The French Stage in the xviii Century: A Study in the Advent of the Italian Order*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1957, p. 546-547, as well as the entry on 'Theater Design' in Martin Banham (ed), *The Cambridge Guide to Theater* [1988], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 1090-1091.
 - 11 Thomas Fish, 'Manifesting the Miraculous: Tomaso Francini's Scenic Innovations for the Ballet de Cour', *Theatre Arts Journal*, 2/1, 2014, p. 22.

astounding presence of Elisabeth of Bourbon as Minerva¹². Her entrance on stage was a unique experience¹³. Some of the testimonies put a lot of emphasis on describing it as something never seen before. But what provoked such a reaction of wonder in the spectators?

It is clear that the splendorous presence of Elisabeth of Bourbon was reinforced by the light and brightness that dominated the final act. The first traditional appearance of a glory machine in a *ballet de cour*, an elaborate depiction of the heavens opening that incorporated the use of flying figures, took place in this act¹⁴.

Sharon Kettering claims that the ballet started late in the evening and lasted long after midnight. It is also important to note that the ballet was staged in a hall illuminated by approximately 1200 white candles in silver sconces and candelabras that would allow the bejeweled costumes and machinery to sparkle and glow in the candlelight, creating a dazzling effect that produced in the spectator a sense of awe and admiration, as we can infer from the newspaper accounts of this ballet declaring that 'there was so much light that everyone thought it must still be late afternoon or dawn of the next day'¹⁵.

Now was this excessive use of candles by Francini trying to compete or offer an alternative to the space created by the use of fireworks? Fireworks became distinctive of royal celebrations in Paris and the so-called double engagement was not an exception: Louis XIII's engagement to Anne of Austria was celebrated by the city of Paris with fireworks.

The popularity of fireworks would be soon noticed and incorporated into official political propaganda, which suggested a connection with the image of the Sun. Nonetheless, fireworks were impossible to reduplicate on stage, at least in their splendor and grandiosity. Certainly, fireworks create a unique but also hybrid space. They offer a space of joy and unity as they bring people together to gaze at them yet the spectacle of a fireworks display never lasts long. Indeed, fireworks can only display their majestic beauty for a few moments. In this regard, the fact that they illuminated the hall where the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* was performed with more than a thousand candles should be seen as an invitation to a more lasting experience. The fire becomes an icon of power that intends to stay and, by imitating the light of the sun, complements and reassures the audience of its permanent presence.

Another important aspect of the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* was the fact that it also became the first in which the action was displayed on a high stage, which allowed dancers to enter and leave the stage by the 'stones' or 'grottos' located under it¹⁶. This high stage would create a

12 '[She] appeared alone, at the back of the chariot, as the personage to whom this whole ballet referred. The chariot went forward to the middle of the scene [...] as the music was performed [...] there came down out of heaven two great clouds, one on either hand of the chariot and in them appeared Victory and Fame who descending from high brought crowns to Minerva. Having done this, they joined in with the other musicians and sang with them [...] and recite verses by Durand', Description du *Ballet de Madame* (p. 99) quoted in M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet...*, op. cit., p. 89.

13 '[It aroused] admiration for the machines, scenes changes and the quality of the dancing and above all else, the gracefulness of Madame (Elisabeth of Bourbon) who astounded the whole assembly and especially the Ambassador of Spain. Again and again, he expressed the regret that all this was not being performed in the presence of the Spanish prince', F. de Malherbe quoted by C. Smith, 'Part I: 1550-1630', art. cit., p. 93.

14 '...The first traditional appearance of a **glory machine** in a ballet de cour, an elaborate depiction of the heavens opening that incorporates the use of flying figures. For this exquisite effect, two cupid figures descended from the clouds, appearing to draw a chariot carrying the royal daughter along with her entourage of fourteen court ladies. As the chariot advanced two additional clouds descended from the heavens, on which appeared the figures of **Victory and Fame** bearing crowns to adorn Minerva', T. Fish, 'Manifesting the Miraculous...', p. 26 (emphasis is mine).

15 Sharon Kettering, 'Favour and Patronage: Dancers in the Court Ballets of Early Seventeenth-Century France', *Canadian Journal of History*, 43/3, 2008, p. 394.

16 M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet...*, op. cit., p. 90.

distance between the singers and the figures they would praise: the king, Louis XIII, Queen Marie de Medici and Elisabeth. This distance helps to present them as divine and to highlight again the idea introduced in the opening of the play, where France speaks of the kings as a 'living painting that makes visible to our eyes or gaze the divine so that we can understand the holiness or divinity of their throne and wish'¹⁷.

There is, however, something else in this ballet that I consider remarkable: it is the consistent and constant presence of the flame in the fable of the ballet to signify a connection between France and its sovereigns. It is a symbol whose presence throughout the ballet becomes not only a sign of continuity, in spite of its different forms, but also of sovereignty: even during the darkest and most turbulent times, the light kept shining. Moreover, no one possesses it, nor can hold it since it is flame or fire. Thus, in what follows, I will show how this powerful iconography of power unfolds and develops in this ballet.

The *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* opens with a proclamation given on stage by the allegory of France. The fable is divided into four parts, two interludes, and is closed by the appearance or triumph of Elisabeth as Minerva.

Opening	The allegory of France
First part	The Sparks of Fire
Second part	The Sibyls or announcement of the future
Interlude 1	Aurore and the Sun
Third part	The Machlyenes (a Libyan tribe of hermaphrodites and androgynies. They worship Pallas)
Fourth part	The shepherds
Interlude 2	Tritonides (Sea Nymphs or helpers of Galatea)
Closing	The Triumph of Minerva

The opening is a proclamation made by an allegory that represents France. It talks about the past as dark times of chaos, death and destruction brought by wars lost. This time is clarified or cleansed by the flames brought by the infants of Leda, referring to Helena of Troy and the twins Castor and Pollux. In this recital, the term alludes to Elisabeth and her two brothers King Louis XIII and Gaston d'Orléans. These flames were brought to France by the Astrea d'Étrurie, the name used to refer to their mother, Marie de Medici. Elisabeth is then described as the one whose "grace and virtues" have transformed the Iron Age into the Golden Age, making her the new Astrea

*[...] le bras de ma Princesse abonde
Tellement és vertus d'une grace feconde,
Que mon age de fer elle a changé en or:
Si bien qu'avec raison diray-je que ma perte
Aux jours de mon salut a rendu porte ouverte
veu que d'elle me vient un si riche thresor (6g).*

The opening ends with a salute to Marie de Medici and King Louis XIII, whose presence defies "the stupid science" by proving that two suns can co-exist together. Moreover, by presenting Elisabeth as the Astraea on earth, it also made Elisabeth a projection of her mother Queen Marie, who when first arrived in Paris was also hailed and praised as Astraea. Indeed, the opening offers

17 'Ainsi que tes Roys sont la vivante peinture / Qui expose à nos yeux la divine nature, / Aussi sont-ils sacrés, leur throne et leur vouloir', quoted in *ibid.*, p. 70.

encouragement to Elisabeth, for whom success as a future princess of Spain is predicted in this new journey because she has everything needed: 'beauty, love, virtues, graces and the empire of the sea'¹⁸ (70), the last can be seen as an allusion to her father, Henri IV's mastery of Neptune's empire¹⁹.

The first part opens with Night, who is followed by nine children dressed as sparks of fire. They are running with four candles burning on their heads and a torch in hand. In this part, the *flambeaux* or flames help the poet to create a song where they become the means of connecting three important ideas: first, the life of Elisabeth, because she is the source of virtuousness and prudence. Second, it shows Marie de Medici as a ruler whose brightest light is her son Louis XIII and, in this way, eliminates the circulating rumors about their confrontation for power. Third, the flames announce the victory and fame of France and the miracle of love since they are not just a symbol of justice, fame or victory but also of love as they conquer Crown Prince Philip.

In the **second part**, the stage changes and ten Sibyls emerge from a grotto that mysteriously appears under the stage and dance over the 'Turkish rugs, surrounded by paintings, sculpture and tapestries'²⁰. This second part is all about the king, who is compared to the Sun. He is the brightest flame known to humanity. The metaphor of the Sun speaks of the grandiosity of his kingdom, which cannot be compared to any other.

As the **first interlude** starts, the scene changes again, bringing flowers when Aurora (Dawn) appears followed by the Sun, who crosses the sky. Aurora is the companion to the Sun and helps him to see the vast extent of his kingdom.

In the **third part**, we have Machlyen virgins who describe the king and his power by creating a new connection with the flame from the first part. They are part of those human beings that have defeated the unthinkable and unknown. The flames illuminated their spirits as they do today in King Louis XIII and did in Henri, his father, and in whose mausoleum a fire constantly burns to recreate this continuation of power. In this regard, the flames and the hermaphrodite representation of the Phoenix should remind Louis XIII of his autonomous political power: he should not depend on anything exterior to himself.

Part four of the ballet shows the shepherds on the stage. They announce the arrival of Minerva and the beginning of a new age in France and Spain.

As for why Minerva was made the main character, there is not an explanation²¹. Margaret McGowan claims that the ballet lacks a "fable" in the seventeenth-century sense of the term. The ballet is not staging an episode brought from classical literature but rather, it is more a parade of figures²².

18 *Ibid.*

19 Dénes Harai, 'In Quest of Neptune's Empire: Subaquatic Representations of Political Power in Renaissance and Baroque Europe', *Journal of History and Cultures*, 4, 2014, p. 24-45. *Id.*, *Le Pouvoir au fil de l'eau. Usages politiques des images aquatiques en France, 1594-1715*, Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2015, p. 19-40.

20 Mark Franko, 'Fragments of the Sovereign as Hermaphrodite: Time, History and the Exception in *Le Ballet de Madame*', *Dance Research*, 25/2, 2007, p. 122.

21 Howarth observes that the great festival of Minerva was held on March 19 (p. 99 n 4). The name Minerva will certainly accompany Elisabeth to Spain. After her death in 1644, she was called wise queen, 'Reina Sabia'. María V. López-Cordón Cortezo, 'La construcción de una reina en la edad moderna: entre el paradigma y los modelos', in *Ead.* and Gloria Angeles Franco Rubio (eds.), *Actas de la VIII Reunión Científica de la Fundación Española de Historia Moderna (Madrid, 2-4 de junio de 2004)*, 2005, vol. 1, *La reina Isabel y las reinas de España: realidad, modelos e imagen historiográfica*, Madrid, Fundación Española de Historia Moderna, p. 324. Mark Franko suggests a connection between Minerva and the Androgyne nature of the Phoenix that in the ballet signaled Louis XIII. M. Franko, 'Fragments of the Sovereign...', art. cit., p. 122-125.

22 M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet...*, op. cit., p. 88.

However, there is a clear purpose in the ballet. The *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* is an '*apologie politique*', it not only celebrates the marriages but also intends to glorify France as a nation that cannot be imitated by any other one²³. The political importance of the ballet is also highlighted by the description that later appeared in *Le Mercure françois*²⁴.

The account does not leave any doubt about the purpose of the celebration. It shows the marriage of Elisabeth to Prince Philip as a conquest. The verses recited during the parade were supposed to have a connection with this spectacle of victory not only of Elisabeth over Philip, but also of Marie de Medici's diplomatic effort to find in the so-called exchange of princesses a way to address the constant threat that Spain represented to France. McGowan affirms that this entire idea is stressed at the end of the ballet, where Elisabeth is presented as the new and triumphal dawn (Aurora). Finally, the shepherds recite the following verses written by Malherbe that announce the imminent return of the Golden Age under a king, Elisabeth's brother, Louis XIII:

Un siècle renaistra comblé d'heur et de joye,
Où le nombre des ans sera la seule voye
D'arriver au trepas :
Tout y sera sans fiel comme au temps de nos pères :
Et mesmes les vipers
Y piqueront sans nuire, ou ne piqueront pas.
La terre en tous endroits produira toutes choses :
Tous metaux seront or, toutes fleurs seront roses,
Tous arbres oliviers :
L'an n'aura plus d'hyver, le Jour n'aura plus d'ombre :
Et les perles sans nombre
Germeront dans la Seine au milieu des graviers²⁵.

The figure of Astrea is also mentioned in Lacroix's account but indirectly. This is important because, as I mentioned before, it declares a continuation between Elisabeth, the daughter, and Marie, the mother, who was also introduced and hailed as Astrea, as these verses show. They are taken from a poem composed by Pierre Pineton de Chambrun to celebrate the wedding of Marie de Medici to Henri IV,

Nous a promis
De faire naître un siècle d'or :
La Vierge Astrée...
Nous a douée
D'un beau thresor.
Ceste princesse est l'ornement
Du firmament²⁶...

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁴ M. Franko, 'Fragments of the Sovereign...', art. cit., p. 122.

²⁵ '[A new century will be born of happiness and joy / where the great Age will be the only way / to reach the end / There everything will be without bile (sin) as it was in the time of our parents; / And the same with the vipers, they will bite without harm or will not bite at all / All parts of the Earth will produce all things/ all minerals will be or all flowers will be rose / All the olive trees / The year will not longer have a winter, the Day, will not have shadows / an innumerable number of pearls / will grow in the Seine in the middle of the gravels]', quoted in M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet...*, op. cit., p. 93-94.

²⁶ For more information on Marie de Medici's performative diplomacy, see Janie Cole's "Representations of Female Power: Musical Spectacle at the Paris Court of Maria de' Medici, the Italian Minerva of France", in M. A. Katritzky, Pavel Drábek (eds.), *Transnational Connections in Early Modern Theatre*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, p. 197-221.

As princess of France, we know that Elisabeth participated in at least one other ballet, but it was only the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* that was written to show her as the center of the festivities, where the grandiosity of her beauty is comparable to the splendor aroused by the spectacle brought by the lights (candles) and the constant changes of decorations and panels shown during the ballet, an astounding esthetic experience provoked by a state of constant admiration that characterized the triumph. It is a ballet that pretends to celebrate Elisabeth's glorious (Fame) amorous conquest (Victory) over Prince Philip. Certainly, both marriages (Elisabeth's and Louis') signal the beginning of the Golden Age for France led by Marie de Medici²⁷. As we will see next, this experience will prove to be at the heart of Isabel's own staging of the festivities in Aranjuez, where she might have intended to repeat the apotheotic spectacle staged seven years earlier in Paris but now in the presence of Philip IV²⁸.

Mendoza's account *Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez*²⁹

In a previous publication³⁰, I have explained in detail why, when studying Hurtado de Mendoza's account, it is important to pay attention to the inscription or 'dedicatoria'³¹, in which the author claims not only that the festivities of Aranjuez belonged to Isabel but also presents them as a delight or wonder to the sight almost impossible to imitate in writing³².

This claim of the queen as the one who was in charge of the spectacle also appeared in Villamediana's *La Gloria de Niquea*³³. Both accounts also agreed on Isabel as the one who chose the 'Garden of the Island' as the place for a celebration that she herself would direct³⁴. Moreover, the

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- 27 '[It promised us / to make born a Golden Age / The Virgin Astrea / It has given us / a beautiful treasure / This princess is the ornament of the firmament]', Pierre Pineton de Chambrun, *Estrennes sur le mariage du Roy et de Marie de Médicis, princesse de Florence. Augmenté d'un cantique et resjouissance des François sur la venue de la Roynne en France*, Paris, D. Binet, 1601, p. 13.
- 28 For Frederick De Armas the response that Villamediana sought to elicit from his audience with *The Glory of Niquea* was amazement. Frederick A. De Armas, *The Return of Astræa. An Astral-Imperial Myth in Calderon*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1996, p. 212. A revised edition was published in Spanish in 2016, *Id.* and Guillermo Gómez Sánchez-Ferrer, *El retorno de Astrea: astrología, mito e imperio en Calderón*, Madrid, Iberoamericana, Vervuert, Universidad de Navarra, 2026.
- 29 Stating that he is writing by request of Maria de Guzman de Zuniga, Count-Duke Olivares's daughter, in this account Hurtado de Mendoza describes the festivity that took place in Aranjuez in 1622 to celebrate King Philip IV's birthday. All quotes come from Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza, 'Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez', in *Obras poéticas de Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza*, ed. Rafael Benitez Claros, Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1947, t. I, p. 3-26.
- 30 Carmela V. Mattza, 'A Stage for Isabel de Borbón: From Paris to Aranjuez', in Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero (eds.), *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theaters*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 153-170.
- 31 This one, for example, is not included in the edition of the text that appeared in Teresa Ferrer Vals (ed.), *Nobleza y espectáculo teatral: estudio y documentos (1535-1622)*, Madrid/Sevilla/Valencia, UNED/Universidad de Sevilla/Universitat de València, 1993.
- 32 The dedicatory only appears in the Spanish version (1623). It does not appear in Fanshawe's translation and edition of the play. '...la fiesta de Aranjuez (por ser de la Reyna nuestra señora) quedase tan admirable a la memoria como a los ojos: esto es tan imposible, como igualarla mas no podrá deslucirla aún escribirla yo', A. Hurtado de Mendoza, 'Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez', *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 33 Juan Tassis y Peralta, conde de Villamediana, 'Prólogo, acotación y loa de *La Gloria de Niquea*', in *Obras*, ed. Juan Manuel Rozas, Madrid, Castalia, 1969, p. 360.
- 34 This place selected by the queen was a little forest surrounded by the river Tajo as we read in Mendoza's account: [JARDIN DE LA ISLA] 'Este sitio [...] contiene entre muchos milagros de amenidad, un jardín, que el Tajo lo ciñe en dos corrientes, y a suspenso, ya presuroso formandole isla, y sirviendole de muro, en que los árboles son una vez deleitosas almenas, y otras floridas márgenes. [...] Este eligió la Reyna nuestra señora para celebrar en él (con la mayor magnificencia que vio ningún siglo, aunque blasone la ostentación romana) el dichoso cumplimiento de los años del Rey nuestro señor. El diecisiete de su bizarra edad y el segundo de su felicísimo reinado.' A. Hurtado de Mendoza, 'Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez', *op. cit.*, p. 6. This Seat [...] contains amongst many other Miracles of amenity a Garden,

opening of the play shows 'an allegory of river Tagus (played by Margarita de Tabara) surrounded by water and wood Nymphs'³⁵, which not only evokes the place and use of allegories of water in the artistic and political representations made in France to salute the rule of Henri IV at the beginning of the seventeenth century³⁶, but also the second interlude of the Ballet *Triumph of Minerva*, where Tritons are shown to bring onto stage the story of Orpheus and Pluto, which serves as a prelude to the hail of Queen Marie de Medici as protector of the monarchy³⁷.

During the *Fiesta de Aranjuez*, two plays were staged, *The Glory of Niquea* and *El Vellocino de oro* or *Golden Fleece* by Lope de Vega³⁸ after which, there was a fire whose real cause was difficult to determine. Nonetheless, by reading these accounts, it becomes evident that the *fiesta de Aranjuez* organized by the queen was conceived as an aesthetical spectacle of which both *The Glory* and Lope de Vega's *The Golden Fleece* were supposed to be part³⁹. Mendoza refuses to call these two plays *comedias*, but rather uses *invenciones* as a way to distinguish them from any form of theater practice in the *corrales*, the public playhouse in Early Modern Iberia. Mendoza confesses his admiration and considers these *invenciones* superior to any Italian spectacle⁴⁰. Very often, critics have stressed the importance of *The Glory of Niquea* for the history of the Spanish Golden Age theater as the play that establishes a new beginning in terms of spectacle thanks to the heavy use of theatrical machines. They have usually tended to read it as being the result of the work done by the Italian engineer Fontana, who was brought from Naples to Madrid for this purpose, neglecting any influence Isabel's likes born in the French court might have had on the play⁴¹.

which Tagus embraces with two Currents, sometimes in suspense, sometimes hasty, shaping it an Isle, and serving it for a Wall, over which the Trees are one way delightful Battlements, another, they are flow'ry Margents. [...] *This the Queen made choice of to celebrate there in (with the greatest magnificence that any age hath seen, boast what it will the Roman ostentation) the happy birth-day of Our Sovereign Lord the King, the seventeenth year of his flourishing age, and the second of his most blessed reign.* (Transl. Richard Fanshawe, *Querer por solo querer. To love only for love sake: a dramattick romance: represented at Aranjuez, before the King and Queen of Spain...*, London, Printed by William Godbid, and are to be sold by Moses Pitt, 1671, p. 2-3.

35 Frank A. Domínguez, 'Philip IV's Fiesta de Aranjuez, Part I: The Marriage of Cosimo II de Medici to María Magdalena de Austria and Leonor Pimentel', *Hispanófila*, 157, 2009, p. 40.

36 For details, see D. Harai, *Le Pouvoir au fil de l'eau...*, op. cit., 2015.

37 M. McGowan, *L'Art du ballet...*, op. cit., p. 85-87.

38 The play is based on two different works, the second part of *The Amadis from Greece (Amadis de Grecia)* by Feliciano da Silva and *The florisel of Niquea (El florisel de Niquea)* but with changes. Lidia Gutierrez Arranz, 'La mitología en La gloria de Niquea del Conde de Villamediana', in Ignacio Arellano and María Elena Arenas Cruz (eds.), *Paraninfos, segundones y epígonos de la comedia del Siglo de Oro*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 2004, p. 99.

39 For Frank A. Domínguez, 'This festival and its plays have been considered the opening salvo of what was to become Philip's very active patronage of theatrical court productions in the Italian manner. But, while several aspects of the *comedias* and the paratheatrical elements that surrounded them have been the object of study, no one has fully explained the reasons why Lope's *Vellocino* might have been chosen or what role Leonor Pimentel played in that choice.' For Domínguez '[...] The selection of *El vellocino de oro* was influenced by two things: 1) the popularity of an account describing the marriage of Maria Magdalena de Austria to Cosimo II de Medici and 2) the coming to power in Spain of people like Leonor Pimentel who used their extensive Italian contacts to distinguish themselves from the previous reign', Frank A. Domínguez, 'Philip IV's Fiesta de Aranjuez [...]', art. cit., p. 41.

40 'Estas representaciones que no admiten en el nombre vulgar de comedia, y se le da de invención, la decencia de Palacio (desprecio más que imitación de los espectáculos antiguos, de que aún hoy Italia, presume tanto de gentil) merecía mas atinada pluma y buscarla que dignamente pudiera escribirlo, quedara en silencio, pues la más cuidadosa se debiera parte de mi desconfianza, ajeno gusto (y no mi presunción) me empeña en esta noticia, sino ingeniosa, verdadera, que me halle presente, y entonces lo admire, y ahora lo escribo con el recelo de su ofensa: pero nada podrá lucirla como la puntualidad.' A. Hurtado de Mendoza, 'Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez', op. cit., p. 7.

41 Gareth Davies writes that festivities such as Lerma's *fiestas* of 1614 and 1617 (inspired by the Italian experience and the Flemish love of display) could have influenced Mendoza's own artistic development, but it was 'fiesta of Aranjuez' the one that impacted him the most. Gareth A. Davies, *A Poet at Court. Antonio Hurtado de Mendoza*, Oxford, Dolphin, 1971, p. 222-224.

The theme of *The Glory* was not new, it was a common topic in official celebrations⁴². The title of the *comedia* is interesting since it contains a play on words that becomes evident as the *Fiesta* unfolds. Hurtado de Mendoza states that the *Fiesta* begins when Philip IV, the king, enters the theatrical space and his presence is announced by the musicians with *chirimias* and trumpets. The king is not only received by the actors and actresses, the members of the court and the queen, but also by a statue of Mars and Mercury on the stage. In the play by Villamediana, we read that the monarch is saluted by 'Corriente', who declares himself a stream of El Tajo (one of the most important Spanish rivers) and as so, part of the mythological tradition that brings together Ulysses, Thetis and Neptune (*Obras* 362-363). Then, the *loa* sung by Francisca de Távora announces the return of the Golden Age to Philip IV, who also receive Mars' support:

*Siempre feliz y tan capaz de aumento
Soberano señor, tu imperio sea
Pues dexo de asistir el firmamento
Asistir a tu gobierno Astrea
Marte tu escudo te dará sediento
de que al reflejo de su acero vea
la invidia, respetadas tus hazañas,
propagado el honor de las Españas*⁴³.

Niquea is played by the infant Maria de Austria, King Philip's sister. She is rescued by Amadis, played by doña Isabel de Aragón, from a captivity produced by a spell. Amadis, however, is only able to do so after the goddess of beauty, played by Isabel, gives her consent for him to proceed in that way. In this play—Hurtado de Mendoza reminds us—the name "glory of Niquea" refers not only to the character but also to the sphere made of crystal and gold that looks more like a house of mirrors or a very large diamond that itself represents the true house of the Sun:

*[...] se descubrió la hermosa apariencia de la gloria de Niquea, que se cifraba en una bellísima esfera de cristal, y oro que los techos y paredes, antes parecía un diamante, que muchos, haciendo verdadera la casa del Sol, que finge Ovidio, y en perspectiva un trono alto en que estaba sentada la Reina, que era la diosa de la hermosura, a quien Amadis pedía licencia, para desencantar a Niquea, que la representaba la señora infanta [...]*⁴⁴.

This remark by Hurtado de Mendoza is important because he calls the house of Sun a diamond and not just a mirror or crystal, as it appeared in Villamediana's play (fl. 38-39). The so-called diamond is located 'in perspective' (*en perspectiva*) to the goddess of beauty (as if the goddess and the house belong to each other). This true house of the Sun that Mendoza incorrectly attributes to Ovid is a direct reference to the announcement of the return of the Golden Age to earth, i.e., the

42 Amadis de Gaula was the theme of the play staged to celebrate the marriage of Philip II with Ana de Austria. See T. Ferrer Valls (*Nobleza y Espectáculo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 191-196) to access the accounts on this festivity. See also María M. Carrión's interpretation of this event. María Mercedes Carrión, *Subject Stages: Marriage, Theatre and the Law in Early Modern Spain*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, Chapter 3, 'The birth of the *Comedia* and the bride on stage', p. 53-72.

43 J. Tassis y Peralta, conde de Villamediana, 'Prólogo, acotación y loa de *La Gloria de Niquea*', *op. cit.*, p. 368. '[Always content and so able to increase / Sovereign Lord, your empire is / As I dexo attending the sky / Attend your government Astrea / Marte your shield will give you thirsty / that the reflection of its steel look / the envy, respected your deeds, / spread the honor of Spain.]'

44 '...presented itself the fair scene of the Glory of Niquea, who was cypher'd in a most beautiful sphere of crystal and gold, so that the roofs and walls thereof seemed rather one than many diamonds, verifying the Palace of the Sun, which Ovid feings and in perspective a high throne wherein was placed the Queen, who fate for the goddess of Beauty, of whom Amadis begged to leave to disinchant Niquea, represented by the infanta...', R. Fanshawe, *Querer por solo querer...*, *op. cit.*, 1671, p. 14. A. Hurtado de Mendoza, 'Relación de la fiesta de Aranjuez', *art. cit.*, p. 17-18.

return of the goddess Astrea who also brings Apollo to reign (Virgil, *Eclogues*, IV)⁴⁵. This is a return to that first announcement in the *Loa* by Europa, who was represented by Francisca de Tavora, when she sang the *loa* invoking the return of Astrea⁴⁶.

There is a political subtext that the mythological language of *The Glory of Niquea* certainly serves to transmit. It continues a propagandistic message that aims to support the image of Philip IV as a powerful king, who as Mars reigns and rules over everything⁴⁷ and should be able to do so without interference or dependency on a *Private* or *Prime Minister* just as his grandfather Philip II did. However, the mythological language also heralds Isabel not only as the goddess of Beauty (*la diosa de la Hermosura*) but as Astrea⁴⁸, whose privileged position with respect to the House of the Sun points her as the one who can lead us to it. Thus, Queen Isabel's own presence in the play stresses her importance in the advent of the Golden Age. Therefore, it is she who makes possible the rule of Apollo or the Sun, in this case King Philip IV, overshadowing in this way, any role that a *Private* or *Valido* could play in this new era, as her mother, Marie de Medici, the first Astrea in this genealogy of queens, tried to do, although without success, as history showed later⁴⁹. In *The Glory of Niquea*, the glory consists not much in Niquea being rescued, but mostly in meeting the goddess of Beauty, a prelude to enter into the House of the Sun.

Certainly, the play serves to document the beginning of the mythological image of Philip IV as the New Sun, an image that was already well known in the French court. I would add that the *Relación* also allows us to discover how Queen Isabel became a polysemic icon of power not only in Villamediana's play but also during the *Fiesta*.

Mendoza's account of *Fiesta de Aranjuez* shows some important similarities between *The Glory* and the ballet *The Triumph of Minerva*, such as the heavy use of decorations, music, dancers, allegories, theater machinery and the role that Isabel played in both of them: she was there to be admired as if she were 'a magnificent sculpture of herself'⁵⁰. Instead of Fame and Victory (*Ballet*), in *The Glory* we found the statues of Mars and Mercury on stage. Critics agree that the presence of Mars is to signal Philip IV, and they have pondered the significance of the other one. De Armas interprets it as Villamediana's reference to himself⁵¹. If so, it was a very impertinent and insolent attribution, since by having the two statues appear together, Villamediana was also asserting that between he and the King there was no difference, that they were equals.

45 For more about the presence of Astrea in the Spanish Golden Age Comedia, see F. A. De Armas, *The Return of Astrea*, *op. cit.*.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

47 L. Gutierrez Arranz, 'La mitología en La gloria de Niquea del Conde de Villamediana', *art. cit.*, p. 97-98.

48 In a recent essay, Victor Minguez examines how Queen Isabel de Bourbon was represented using astral and celestial motifs—for example, lunar symbolism—and what these emblematic images signified in the politics, culture, and visual rhetoric of their time. Víctor Mínguez, 'The Lunar Queens Who Came from France: Celestial Emblematic Images of Elisabeth of Valois, Elisabeth of Bourbon and Marie Louise of Orléans', *The Court Historian*, 2025, 30(2), p. 118–134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14629712.2025.2524948>.

49 For a study of the genealogy of the Speculum Reginae among the women of the Habsburg dynasty see, Carmela V. Mattza, 'De María de Portugal a Isabel Clara Eugenia: Luisa Sigea y el Diálogo de dos doncellas como speculum reginae', *Hipogrifo*, 13.2, 2025, p. 63-82. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13035/H.2025.13.02.06>.

50 Carmen Sanz Ayán is commenting on Isabel's presence in *La Gloria de Niquea*: 'Una reina [...] que tan solo era admirada en su esplendor como si fuera una magnífica escultura de si misma'. Carmen Sanz Ayán, 'Felipe IV y el Teatro', in José Alcalá-Zamora (ed.), *Felipe IV. El hombre y el reinado*, Madrid, Real Academia de la Historia/Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2005, p. 281.

51 For De Armas, Villamediana's play sought to elevate the King and nobility to a higher plane. F. A. De Armas, *The Return of Astræa...*, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

The *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve* and *The Glory of Niquea* were a two-act spectacle in which there were similar components, such as music, dance, the use of allegories and in both of them, Isabel will be shown to be admired. But in Villamediana's play, 'the spectators will see the King among them, while his wife is recognized as a goddess on stage'⁵², which finally makes us ponder who the play is really trying to exalt, Queen Isabel or Philip IV?

Mendoza ends his account of the *Fiesta* in Aranjuez with two verses. They show that, during the entire spectacle, the queen never says a word. This is another distinctive reference to the ballet she danced in Paris and where, as Minerva, she represented chaste love and she won. Now in Madrid, and as Venus, the goddess of Beauty, she was able to overcome even the furious and brave Mars and without a word, but with the power of the spectacle for their eyes created by Villamediana.

*Y la Reina (principio y gloria de la fiesta, y justamente suya, porque ni de su grandeza se pudo esperar menor, ni ella merecia menos dueño) con su presencia la libró de competida, y de la esperanza de ser más, y porque solo con asistirla le dio tanto esplendor, sin representar ningún verso, en estos dos cifraron, lo que no bastaran a comprender muchos. Siendo la fiesta de hablar, callando lo venció todo*⁵³.

In *La Gloria de Niquea*, Villamediana ordered two statues to be built, one of Mars to represent the king Philip IV, and another of Mercury to represent himself⁵⁴. However, the play ends with the exaltation not only of the king but of Queen Isabel, who played the goddess of Beauty, and who, as had happened in Paris with the *Ballet du Triomphe de Minerve*, appears at the end of the play, not just to be admired but also revered in accord with the topic of the celebration in Paris.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

53 'The Queen, Foundress and Glory of the Festival, so twice Hers, and justly, for neither from Her could it be expected less, nor did it deserve a less Mistress, by her presence did free it from the fear of competition, and from the hope of being more; who, because, only by Her being of the Company, She gave the Scene so much Lustre, without pronouncing one Verse: In these following was written in Figures, that which many had not been sufficient to comprehend in words at length. / The *Speaking* being the best Thing of the *Play*, / SHE, who spake nothing, bare the Bell away.' R. Fanshawe, *Querer por solo querer...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

54 F.A. De Armas, *The Return of Astræa...*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.