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Scents and Celestinas: Alchemical Women in Early Modern Spain

MARGARET E. BOYLE

Spanish playwright Lope de Vega depicts the perfumer and traveling vendor Belarda as protagonist of his 1621 play *El leal criado* [*The Loyal Servant*], offering for his audiences a popular representation of women as “makers.”¹ It is significant to note that even in early print editions of the play, Belarda’s name is listed alongside her professional title of perfumer. While audiences primarily observe Belarda manufacturing or selling perfumes or other products capable of transforming the buyer and/or wearer as just one of many subplots of the *comedia*’s frame, close study of this character within her historical context allows us to comment more broadly on Spanish women’s engagement with “making” as tied to an array of contemporary chemical and alchemical practices, both literary and historical.

This reading of alchemy and chemistry tied to making and transformation includes the production of cosmetics; medical, social, spiritual, and magical remedies; and the broad sphere of “kitchen chymistries,” including the making of food.² Through an introduction to this theatrical character, as well as a discussion of her literary and historical contemporaries, these comparisons open new ways

¹ The genre of the three-act *comedia* held to Lope’s directive concerning popular theater where playtexts are designed to both educate and entertain. For the full context, consult Lope’s treatise, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609), ed. Enrique García Santo-Tomás (Madrid: Catedra, 2006).

² I use the term “chymistry” following William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe, who have argued that the separations of chemistry and alchemy would have been less defined in the early modern period; see Newman and Principe, “Alchemy vs. Chemistry: The Etymological Origins of a Historiographic Mistake,” *Early Science and Medicine* 3, no. 1 (1998): 32–65.

of exploring a variety of historical documents tied to Spanish women's engagement with chymistry, including a vast array of Inquisitional records and personal and published collections of recipes. These materials then become evidence of the hybrid culture of the early modern period, what Pamela H. Smith describes as "techno-medico-science," or as John Slater, Marlíaluz López-Terrada, and José Pardo-Tomás observe for the case of Spain: the disjunction and pluralities between formal occupations and practices.³

In the three-act *El leal criado* (1621), we are introduced to Belarda as perfumer, her legible identification in this play confirming the idea that by the end of the 1630s the "perfumer" emerged as a recognizable professional identity, requiring knowledge and engagement with a variety of chemical and alchemical processes including distillation.⁴ Countless plays in the period across Europe make references to perfumes, scented waters, and scented gloves.⁵ The *alambiques* —receptacles found throughout the play— are documented in contemporary perfume-making handbooks and are defined by Sebastián de Covarrubias's 1611 dictionary as vessels used for distillation.⁶ Belarda stands out early in the play for her encyclopedic knowledge of her trade and her investment in sales. Consider the following lines:

³ Luis S. Granjel describes a long tradition of hybrid approaches to medicine in early modern Spain, linking pharmacological practices to manual practices, as well as to miracles, religious beliefs, superstitions, and astrology frequently documented in popular literary texts, including *La Celestina*; see Granjel, *La Medicina Española Renacentista* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1980), 139–40). Mar Rey Bueno's evocative *Evas alquímicas* is another key source for engaging with the roles of women and alchemy in Spain over time. This brief essay is indebted to her suggestion that "[l]as cocinas de estas mujeres no se diferenciaban, en nada, de un laboratorio alquímico" ["women's kitchens were in no way different than an alchemical laboratory"]; see Bueno, *Evas alquímicas* (Valladolid: Glyphos Publicaciones, 2017), 125. Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Spanish to English are mine.

⁴ Although the focus is on England, Holly Dugan's *The Ephemeral History of Perfume* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011) provides a thoughtful introduction to the profession of the perfumer and early modern olfactory history. Attending to scent history broadly also points us to innovative new research in cognitive science, where A.S. Barwich in *Smellosophy* describes how studying perfume leads us explore how the brain represents sensory information and the nature of perception (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁵ A famous line comes from Ben Jonson's 1609 play *The Alchemist*: "Spanish titillation in a glove [of] the best perfume" (4.4.13–14), ed. F.H. Mares (London: Methuen Publishing, 1967).

⁶ Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o Española* (1611; Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2006), 75.

If you are looking for perfumes or scented waters in another part of this city, sir you have come to the best place; that not in Paris, nor anywhere in Spain or Italy will you find such beautiful musk and civet, black amber, and grey amber. There is spicebush from China, and tablets from Lisbon, whose mixture is praised as the most precious and fine. There are Neopolitan soaps, not from Alessio Piamontese; I have some that in just one month will make hands so smooth. Unguents, waters, oils, butters, changers, softeners, quintessence, insurance, radiance, lures, and hair removers. If you have a wife or lady, bring her one of these miracles.⁷

The short dialogue quickly transports the audience to Belarda's world of perfumery, where the protagonist's perfume making and selling is tied to an array of transformative practices. References to more commonplace cosmetics are interwoven with powerful gendered dynamics concerning beauty, love, and sexuality. The politics of transnational ingredient exchange are placed front and center in connections between Spain, Italy, France, Portugal, and China. Finally, we locate explicit reference to alchemical practice, not only with naming Alessio Piemontese's widely celebrated alchemical treasure *Book of Secrets* (first published in Italian in 1557, and later translated into Spanish and widely circulated by the time of Lope's play) but also with reference to the *Fifth Essence* and the wider promise of transformation offered by this substance. These commercial and material references are dynamic and charged with desire, promising change from young to old, rough to smooth, and even more explicitly with reference to the literary foremother and fellow perfume-vendor Celestina: from unchaste to virgin. The experience and manufacturing of beauty and sexuality can thus be read in terms of alchemical transformation, reliant on a diverse set of chemical and alchemical practices, including compounding and distillation.

⁷ "Si en otra parte buscáis/ perfumes o aguas de olor,/ de aquesta ciudad, señor,/ hoy en lo mejor estáis;/ que no hay en todo París,/ ni en toda España ni Italia,/ tan bello almizcle y algalia,/ ámbar negro y ámbar gris./ Hay menjuí de la China,/ y pastillas de Lisboa,/ cuya mixtura se loa/ por la más preciosa y fina./ Jabones napolitanos,/ no de alejo paimontés,/ tengo tales, que en un mes/ hacen regaladas manos./ Ungüentos, aguas, aceites,/ mantecas, mudas, blanduras,/ quintas esencias, seguras,/ resplandor, cebos y afeites./ Si tenéis esposa o dama/ llevalde un milagro de estos" (ll. 140–59).

It is widely argued the professionalization and consolidation of science and medicine did not completely obliterate the participation of women or the places for study and practice. As Meredith Ray demonstrates, “early modern science was not studied and practiced only in universities, laboratories, anatomy theaters, or other public spaces. Rather, natural inquiry unfolded in a variety of other contexts as well, many of which were more hospitable to the participation of women.”⁸ For example, women may have had access to some degree of informal education or access to learning through experience in a range of locations, including leading or assisting home workshops, domestic or professional apothecary work, volunteer or paid caretaking responsibilities. For the home in particular, Elaine Leong writes, “early modern households have emerged not only as social, economic, political and intellectual hubs but also as one of the main locations and driving force for a range of epistemic enterprises” — a generative and representative strain of argumentation that has made new space for scholars to reconceptualize models and modes of women’s participation.⁹

While audiences witness Belarda’s engagement with alchemical practices on stage, archival documentation provides us with evidence of women making and experimenting. Inquisition trials contemporary to Lope’s play frequently contain accounts from women accused of witchcraft or heresy; the testimonies provided in these trials offer an alternative way of engaging with the topic of women as makers. One brief example can be found in the 1649–1650 declarations of María Francisca (born ca. 1620s), who was accused by the Toledo Inquisition for practicing love spells.¹⁰ Although she is ultimately absolved of the charges, she describes in detail her pursuits with a variety of chemical and alchemical activities. In her second audience on 9 June 1650 in Toledo, the following lines read as if it were directly extracted from a receipt book from the period: “the cure is to take a little woman’s milk and incense and rosemary and an egg white, ground up and then mixed to dip some linen in it, place on the forehead, and say *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit Holy Amen Jesus*, the headache

⁸ Meredith Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

⁹ Elaine Leong, *Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine Science and the Household in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7.

¹⁰ *Proceso de fe de María Francisca, mujer del cortador Gabriel Mantilla y vecina de Lagartera, por hechicería*. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Inquisición, 86, Exp. 11.

is removed and they were better.”¹¹ This naming of particular ingredients, her description of process, and the hybrid methods evoked in this fragment are certainly representative of contemporary practices.

Another compelling example can be found in the stories of the mother and daughter: María Sánchez de la Rosa (ca. 1642–1717) and Elena de Tordesillas (born ca. 1659), both recognized and prosecuted during their lifetimes for their connections with an array of healing activities.¹² An inventory of objects and ingredients used for a variety of culinary, medical, and chymical purposes was found in María and Elena’s home, described and contextualized by the court-hired apothecary Juan de Armunia. Some of the objects most closely connected to alchemy include the making of ointments, poultices, or dyes — for fabric or hair, including: marcasite (*marquesita de oro*), a mineral similar to pyrite, vitriol (*caparrosa empanizada*); artificial cinnabar (*cinabrio artificial*), which can have an alchemical use in the transmutation of metals; and finally “aqua fortis,” another oft-cited distilled product.

Perhaps most fascinatingly, in connection with *El leal criado*, María and Elena’s home is also the location of two ingredients connected with the world of perfumery: black amber and *algalia* (also known as civet musk: a glandular secretion produced by civets and used in perfumery). The court apothecary identified these two ingredients, and noted them as commonly used by glovers. In Lope’s play, the character Leonardo makes references to these ingredients, for example when he talks about the cost of amber, “el ámbar es extremado pero el precio ma ha espantado” (l. 365) [the amber is distinctive but the price has scared me], or when Belarda boasts about her inventory of “ámbar fino en cantidad” [a quantity of fine amber] (l. 610). Celestina is likewise linked to these ingredients: “Y en su casa hazía perfumes. . .ámbar, algalia, polvillos” [at home she made perfumes. . .amber,

¹¹ “el curar es tomar un poco de leche de mujer y incienso y romero y una clara de huebo, y molido y batido mojar en ello unas estopas de lino, y ponerlo en la frente, diciendo en el nombre del Padre y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo amen Jesús, se quitaba el dolor de la cabeça y se hallaban mejor” (*Proceso de fe de María Francisca*).

¹² Carolin Schmitz and Maríaluz López-Terrada provide a comprehensive introduction to the biographies of this mother and daughter, demonstrating how they are representative models of urban empirical healers; see Schmitz and López-Terrada, “Healing Across Ideological Boundaries in Late Seventeenth-Century Madrid,” *Health and Healing in the Early Modern Iberian World: A Gendered Perspective*, ed. Margaret Boyle and Sarah Owens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 21–52.

civet musk, powders].¹³ Alongside the context of perfume-making as primarily a distillation practice, it is also worth citing contemporary Spanish women engaged with other forms of distillation: for example, the 1597 inventory of Valladolid resident María de la Vega contains an array of supplies and ingredients that she used to manufacture “medicinal waters,” and that of seventeenth-century *alojera* María Lozana, indicates that she made and sold — *aloja*, a popular distilled mead-like beverage made of honey and spices — in Valladolid.¹⁴ Once again, we observe how ingredients and processes are interwoven between archive and literature, underscoring the relevance of Belarda as perfumer and maker in Lope’s play.

The inventory of María and Elena’s home also mentioned a quarto-sized manuscript book of medicines, a handwritten paper on the alchemist Ysaac Hollandus, as well as a notebook on “works of particular metallics and other metal mutations,” and a leather-bound collection of handwritten recipes.¹⁵ Although we do not have access to the particular collection of recipes referenced in the inventory, it is possible to consult other early modern collections for additional evidence of making-in-progress. These works were sometimes authored across multiple generations, multilingual, and frequently made and used by women.¹⁶ These collections reveal the circulation and access to ingredients, modes of experimentation, as well as what Amy Tigner has described as a window into

¹³ Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina*, ed. Dorothy Sherman Severin (Madrid: Catedra, 2000), 111. For additional context, see Lesley K. Twomey, “Perfumes and Perfume-making in the *Celestina*,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 86, no. 1 (2009): 143–49.

¹⁴ Anastasio Rojo catalogued these materials in “Más curanderas que brujas,” *Espejo de brujas. Mujeres transgresoras a través de la Historia* (Madrid: Abada editores, 2012), 315–33. For an excellent overview of the marketplace of *aloja* and early theater, see Rachel Ball, “Water, Wine and Aloja: Consuming Interests in the Corrales de Comedias: 1600–1646,” *Comedia Performance* 10, no. 1 (2013): 59–92.

¹⁵ These materials can be found in the Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid: see AHN, INQ, 96, exp. 2, fol. 32r–39r.

¹⁶ On the production and circulation of recipe collections and receipt books in Spain, see Michael Solomon, *Fictions of Well-Being: Sickly Readers and Vernacular Medical Writing in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Montserrat Cabré, “Women or Healers?: Household Practices and the Categories of Health Care in Late Medieval Iberia,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82, no. 1 (2008): 18–51; and María de los Ángeles Pérez Samper, “Los recetarios de mujeres y para mujeres. Sobre la conversación y transmisión de los saberes domésticos en la época moderna,” *Cuadernos de historia moderna* 19 (1997): 121–54.

“trans-border kitchens.”¹⁷ As we shall see below, just a brief overview of a single Spanish collection provides evidence of the ways culinary, cosmetic, and medical recipes are bound together and the array of chymical knowledge and skills required to interact with the recipes.

The anonymous Spanish collection *Manual de mujeres en el qual se contienen muchas y diversas recetas muy buenas* [The manual for women in which is contained many, very good and diverse recipes] (1475–1525) is one of only a few examples of these collections that has been edited for contemporary audiences.¹⁸ The layout of the book in the context of “kitchen chymistry” is also compelling; frequently blending and confusing categories of recipes, placing, for example, a recipe for candying or preservation alongside medicinal ointments or tonics and requiring users of the recipes to engage varied set of skills and processes including distillation, maceration, and compounding. The presumed audiences of this recipe collection were women, as managers of caregiving within their homes. The *Manual* operates as a comprehensive, though somewhat unwieldy, handbook with its divergent collection of recipes for the treatment of common physical ailments, the preparation of savory and sweet foods, as well as a large number of cosmetic treatments. The manuscript contains 145 recipes, and is organized into medical remedies, fragrances, cosmetics, hair treatments, and recipes for food: twenty-three “medical” for ailments; fourteen for medical/ beauty that are related to mouth and teeth; twenty-four perfume recipes, thirty-one “blandura” recipes (*aclarar*) and “mudas” *para darle color*; one for soaps; thirteen for soaps for hair; twenty-nine for food related items, including jams and stews. Again, returning to Belarda’s early monologue in act one, we are reminded how she presents herself within this same framework of diversified pluralisms, vending a range of many of the same items that appear in the *Manual*. In this way, her breadth of alchemical and chemical skills tie her to the many other users of this circulated recipe collection.

¹⁷ Amy Tigner, “Trans-border Kitchens: Iberian Recipes in Seventeenth-century English Manuscripts” *History of Retailing and Consumption* 19, no. 1 (2019): 51–70. Edith Snook, in “English Women’s Writing and Indigenous Medical Knowledge,” in *A History of Early Modern Women’s Literature*, ed. Patricia Phillippy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 382–97, has described early modern recipes as “the most culturally pervasive form of women’s writing engaged in Atlantic knowledge exchange” (383).

¹⁸ Alicia Martínez Crespo, *Manual de mugeres en el qual se contienen muchas y diversas recetas muy buenas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad, 1995).

These brief examples reveal the strong connections between early modern literature, women, and alchemy, informing and challenging our understanding of women's engagement with a variety of scientific and medical practices. In particular, the literary and historical study of perfume as object and perfumer as profession has been somewhat obscured by normative and reductive understandings of femininity whereby the use and production of perfume has been read as superficial or only aesthetic. Perfumes were certainly used in the secular and frequently contested context of beauty, but also within religious and medical contexts. Manufacturing of these scented products frequently required the acquisition and application of chymical knowledge. More broadly, the study of perfumes and perfumers on the early modern Spanish stage leads us not only through the everyday testing, making, and use of oral and written recipes, but also to rich histories of transatlantic trade and travel tied to particular ingredients, and finally to the increasingly recognized communities of women constructing, preserving, and transforming self via diverse chymical skills and practices.