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Marriage and Well-Being in Jaume Roig's Spill **Jean Dangler**

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"MARRIAGE AND WELL-BEING IN JAUME ROIG'S *SPILL*"

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Jaume Roig wrote the *Spill o Llibre de les dones* in around 1460 when he was approximately sixty years old. Roig was a well-known physician and medical examiner in Valencia whose misogynist *Spill* was popular through the sixteenth century.¹ The work recounts Roig's ostensible experiences with wives and other women, all of whom he deprecates in order to contrast them to the perfect Virgin. In the preface, he explicitly directs the text to a wide variety of male readers beginning with his nephew Baltasar Bou, whom he advises to pass on the *Spill* to young and inexperienced men, gentlemen, and priests who have forgotten their vows of celibacy [vv. 292-322].² Roig wrote the *Spill* to discourage these impressionable or uninitiated men from contact with ordinary women and to encourage them to seek the Virgin for the fulfillment of all their desires.

One of the most compelling ways that Roig develops his arguments against earthly women is through the social convention of marriage. The *Spill* consists of four main books, of which Book Two is devoted to Roig's supposed experiences with evil wives and other women. Most of these episodes take place as Roig follows a "pilgrimage" in search of the Virgin.³ Despite the fact that Roig never expressly identifies himself as the book's narrator, the authority of what is recounted is garnered through the work's connection to Roig the medical professional. The *Spill* is explicitly authorized by Roig's self-identification as a physician at the beginning of the book. The narrator even inserts himself in the work as a medical doctor or examiner when he is called upon to verify the diagnosis of four midwives [3462-94].

In order to find the Virgin, the narrator must first encounter earthly women so that he and the reader will be able to recognize

¹ Besides the one remaining fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Spill*, the work was published three times in the sixteenth century, twice in Valencia [1531, 1561], and once in Barcelona [1561]. For information on editions, see Josep Almiñana Vallés's remarks in the *Spill* 1: 19-136.

² All subsequent references to the *Spill* are from Almiñana Vallés's edition. Quotes of verses are found in volume two, and verse numbers are indicated here.

³ Roig uses the motif of the pilgrimage as an organizing technique in the *Spill*. Hence, the trips the narrator takes throughout the book are figured as an arduous effort to find the Virgin, like the strain of a pilgrimage.

Mary in contrast to her mundane women antitheses. All the events that Roig describes with malicious, ordinary women are meant to vilify them, as the *Spill* presents readers with despicable models of wives so that readers will avoid them. For instance, Roig describes the repulsive sleeping habits of his first wife, who grunts like a pig all night and frequently urinates in bed [2352-54, 2376-78]. With these abhorrent paradigms of female spouses Roig tries to demonstrate what is amiss in conjugal relations, that is, how women's duplicity and pejorative traits negatively affect their husbands and threaten the social order.

Roig links marriage to individual and social well-being in an attempt to demonstrate that men's individual sickness and health determine societal organization and decomposition. The *Spill* defines well-being in medical and biological terms, but also extends its meaning to the social makeup. The work explicitly links men's individual well-being to the social order, indicating that men's illness portends society's consequent malady. Women always constitute the etiology of men's illness and pain. The *Spill* reasons that if men are sick, then some thread in the social fabric is skewed. Roig warns male readers about menacing women because they greatly threaten men's individual well-being and the integrity of the social order.

Marriage is the *Spill*'s point of convergence for the apprehension about individual and societal well-being, and women. The text tries to improve men's well-being by designating women the locus of men's sexual, reproductive, and other ills.⁴ Women are constantly depicted as perilous to men's wholeness and well-being, and the *Spill* tries to show that women's pathological nature, characterized by their excess and their propensity for sin, makes them medically diseased, and hence generators of men's suffering and ill health [Solomon 69, 78-79]. Roig's work disseminates valuable information to men about the etiology of pain and illness in women, offering eternal married life with the sexless Virgin as an alternative to married life with ordinary women.

The *Spill* offers another option against the perils of women, which is that men must better dominate and govern them. In the same way that the *Spill* constitutes a therapeutic manual to improve men's well-being, it may also be considered a handbook on the control of women. The work's arguments about women, wives, and marriage try to positively impact the male reader's well-being and the health of the social order.

Marriage and well-being are explicitly connected in the *Spill* to a contrast between Eva, Ave, and their children. The nefarious women

⁴ Michael Solomon argues that the *Spill* is a manual that contains therapeutic information to maintain men's sexual health 1-4.

whom Roig constantly encounters on his pilgrimage to the Virgin are all figured as Eve's daughters, while men in the *Spill* are the Virgin's sons. The *Spill* builds an impossible scenario regarding men's ideal marriage, indicating that the Virgin and women like her are the only alternatives to the torment caused by ordinary women. But since the Virgin is singular in her virtues, and unique in her immaculate birth of Christ, the text also shows that no earthly women can emulate her because of their tainted lineage as the daughters of Eve ["filles d'Eva" 355-71, 6474-77]. Despite the occasional worthy, mundane woman, such as Roig's actual wife, Isabel Pellicer, whose value ironically derives from her "masculinity" or her *distance* from earthly women, male readers must avoid them in order to preserve their well-being and the social order.⁵ Hence, women can never hope to approach the Virgin, who is figured as a stylized and distant flower, a *lilium inter spinas* [45-46] who must be identified among society's Eve-like thorns.

Women inherit Eve's propensity for sin, which they pass on to all with whom they come in contact. Women are perceived negatively in their fragmented multiplicity, in contrast to men who are allied with the completeness of the Virgin's one offspring, Jesus Christ. Because women derive from Eve, they all possess the same maleficent constitution that propels their actions against men. Roig relies on the biblical Ave/Eva contrast to make forceful accusations against women as wives and mothers, but he also predicates his misogynist arguments on biology and medicine to demonstrate that women's biological makeup as daughters of Eve both defines their gender and determines their actions. The *Spill* constantly emphasizes lineage and offspring in order to contrast Eve, Mary, and their progeny, to advise male readers against fraternizing with earthly women, and to counsel men on how to better dominate them.

The *Spill* concentrates on marriage because it institutionalizes and regulates a series of social relations crucial to society's organization, including important relations between wife and husband, economic transactions between families and within towns due to dowries and family assets, and familial continuity through offspring and inheritance patterns. The *Spill* tries to show that women wish to dominate all of these social relations to their advantage, which they try to carry out by controlling all aspects of human reproduction. The work demonstrates

⁵ In a description that stands out because of its uncharacteristic gender fluidity, the *Spill* claims that Pellicer, a woman with so many favorable qualities, seemed more like a man than a woman [15974-76].

Roig further refers to himself and his wife in 15995-99, subtly mentioning Pellicer in "Is, primer mort, lo peix lliçer" [15998-99] [Is, (plus) the first to die (Abel), the fish lliçer]. The second phrase is untranslatable, and can only be understood with regard to Roig's wife's last name, Pellicer. See editor's note in the *Spill* 2: 798.

that lineage and children have tremendous repercussions on men's lives, which it illustrates with examples of Roig's own pain, due in large part to the failure of his three marriages to produce a beloved son. He blames this lack on his wives and on women healers and other women workers who all collaborate in denying him a son.

Roig devises a number of arguments in order to weaken women's ostensible command over human reproduction. For instance, he tries to vilify women by claiming that those who want to avoid childbirth abort their own fetuses, which he supports with a story about an *ex-beata* whom he wishes to marry. After discovering that the woman had at one time aborted twin fetuses, Roig decides against marrying her. The woman later becomes an evil *alcahueta*, and is eventually whipped and exiled [4121-37, 4191-98]. With such stories, the *Spill* demonstrates that women desire control over all aspects of human reproduction, to the point that without consulting men, they independently decide to terminate their pregnancies. To Roig's dismay, fathers are ignored in the making of decisions about childbirth, attesting to the *Spill's* general distress about women's independence and the threat of their rule.

The *Spill* vilifies women's desire to dominate reproduction by showing that they seek to exclude husbands from human regeneration. Roig illustrates the danger of women's independence in this regard with a story about his second wife's actions when she cannot become pregnant with Roig [4534-601]. She visits a woman doctor's (*metgessa*) "fertility clinic" where the woman diagnoses Roig's semen as the cause of his wife's difficulties. As therapy the *metgessa* offers the wife the use of her laboratory of virile young men as a guarantee of impregnation. But, since the woman healer practices bad medicine, his wife decides not to pursue her services and so divulges her diagnosis and therapy to Roig. He tells the governor of Valencia, Boyl, and then his successor Rabaça, who decides to have the woman secretly hanged in order to avoid a scandal against Roig.

With this story Roig claims that women take advantage of the means of reproduction for their own selfish benefit. His objection to the *metgessa's* therapeutic laboratory or stable of male concubines is based on her ability to designate him the locus of disease, that is, as the "carrier" of semen insufficiency. Upon identifying him as ineffective, she renders him insignificant and unnecessary since she capably provides a remedy outside the accepted domain of marital coitus. The *metgessa* proves perilous for Roig because of her ability to name and diagnose disease, its etiology and makeup.⁶ Roig then eradicates her

⁶ Solomon shows that "the power to disease" has important implications for traditional women healers in the late medieval period 161-65.

from the text in the same way that she marginalizes him from reproductive coitus and obstetrics, by having someone else mediate the deed: Rabaça in Roig's case, and Roig's wife in the *metgessa*'s. This episode makes manifest the potential pain and harm that may befall men when women conspire together. According to the *metgessa*'s scheme, Roig would be excluded from control over his wife's pregnancy, and over patrilineal rights to the future child.

The *Spill*'s keen focus on maleficent women healers similar to the *metgessa* tries to show how women practitioners of the healing arts undermine men's general well-being. Roig's good advice to readers is inextricably linked to their health, which is evidenced by the title pages of the three sixteenth-century editions, each claiming that the work's beneficial and salutary advice [for instance, "consells profitosos y saludables" 1: 49] will increase devotion to the Virgin, and will augment the reader's health and well-being. Good living, good health, and devotion to the Virgin are interdependent—one cannot be had without the other. The *Spill* connects them in order to expressly align the Virgin with the reader's health and well-being. In contrast, ordinary women are linked to men's illness and pain.

The *Spill* indicates that through the command of reproduction, women wish to exercise force in matrimony to men's detriment. Roig's fixation on marriage and reproduction is connected to one of the text's objectives, which is to reestablish a patriarchal order apparently viewed as threatened by women. Throughout the fifteenth century, marriage constituted the licit social paradigm for the attainment of status, societal stability, and financial and physical protection. But the *Spill* suggests that marriage and the social relations it forges also have to be more strictly reestablished. One reason for its buffering lies in marriage's late medieval function as a source of societal repopulation. Marriage promised the creation of children who would potentially serve as soldiers and other workers. Human reproduction was a social imperative to rebuild a work force in many areas of late medieval society adversely affected by plagues and disease. By 1350, for instance, the black death had decreased European populations by as much as one third [Siraisi 42]. The population of Florence had decreased by one half in 1399 [Brodman 91]. In Valencia, the outbreak of 1439 alone killed as many as 11,000 people [Solomon 6].

Disease also constituted a tremendous cause of children's deaths in the medieval period. Ringworm, dysentery, diarrhea, and plague combined to form a dreadful force endangering the lives of children. In Valencia, mortality rates for children rose during May and June of 1383, a plague year [Brodman 119-20]. Roig's identification of women as the etiology of disease and hence the source of these children's deaths is an evident tactic to malign them. Yet, this strategy also

attempts to warn men about women's threat to their children, encouraging men to take more command of marriage, reproduction, and their women partners.

The *Spill's* anxiety about marriage and women's dominance of human reproduction is also due in great part to women's traditional strength regarding inheritance rights and the control of assets. Roig's work responds to the perceived detrimental effects on men of women's conventional, legal right to independently attain economic and social standing. Some wives in the Middle Ages were perhaps wealthy and relatively powerful, given that certain communities such as Cuenca were 'highly egalitarian' in the legal division between wife and husband of assets acquired during a marriage [Dillard 73]. Furthermore, inheritance benefits made conjugal agreements legally enticing for both men and women [Dillard 24-26, 33-35, 68, 128]. The monetary value attributed to women's assets was substantial at times, and even if it was more modest, Roig's work responds to the possible independent dominance of fiscal resources by wives and other women. Some widows in medieval Catalonia, for example, achieved relative success in business dealings with textiles such as silk and linen [Batlle].⁷ As late as 1512, a foreigner in early modern Iberia commented on women's extensive rights regarding the estates of deceased husbands. In his account, Francesco Guicciardini, ambassador to the court of Fernando the Catholic, observed that women were highly regarded in the following manner:

A las mujeres las consideran bastante, tanto mientras viven los maridos como después, porque no sólo recuperan la dote, sino que además se hace cuenta de todo cuanto tenía el marido cuando la esposó, y si se encuentra alguna ganancia o acrecentamiento en los bienes, se divide por mitad, siendo esta mitad enteramente libre para la mujer, quien se puede volver a casar y hacer lo que mejor la acomode, aunque hayan quedado hijos comunes. [Guicciardini 57-58]

The widow was allowed half the couple's assets even if they had children. Other evidence shows that some early fifteenth-century widows in Barcelona also lived comfortably after their husbands' death [Equip Broida].

Women's potential financial rule, along with the "strong legal background" in women's favor with respect to inheritance rights [Dillard 26], caused increasing unease in late medieval Iberian society. The *Spill's* concentration on women's control of marriage and human

⁷ Women were influential in other trades. For a discussion of their role and significance in the late medieval Iberian printing industry, see Nancy Joe Dyer, "Dowagers and Heiresses in the Printing Industry in Late Medieval Spain" 65-80.

regeneration originates in large part in the progressive social tension about women's subversion of a patriarchal social order, and their obstruction of patrilineal inheritance privileges. The work's negative portrayals of women argue against their control of assets and their management of inheritances, while showing that marriage is crucial to the social order despite women's threat to men. Men must seek the Virgin and simultaneously assume more control in marriage in order to restrict women's threat.

For, wives and girlfriends always seek to harm men and distort the societal organization through the exercise of their desire, which is constantly connected to human reproduction. Along the pilgrimage to find the Virgin, at the town of Requena, Roig comes upon a wedding reception in which a number of townspeople are gathered around the bride who claims to be impregnated with an evil spirit. In order to avoid being detected a non-virgin by her new husband, she pretends to be impregnated by the devil, and to be close to giving birth. With great cajoling by her husband, the amoral, deceptive woman manages to convince him that the evil spirit has expunged itself, leaving her with vaginal pain as if she had birthed an actual baby:

Dient, "Jhesus",
ffingint-se storta,
mostra's mig morta;
com esmortida,
esbalayda
clama's: "Del lloch
baix, dix, gran foch
cert m'[h]a lexat
tot escorchat;
par foch salvatge".
Such de plantatge
crech la'n guari.
Axi cobri
son falliment. [3252-65]

This woman disguises her infidelity with a convincing theatrical performance that eventually involves the intercessions and aid of the town's priest. In the end, everyone is pleased with the woman's recovery, especially her new husband.

With this story Roig presents readers with a number of behavioral and moral lessons about women's unbridled desires, beginning with their excessive sexual drive and proclivity for sexual infidelity. The episode also exemplifies women's duplicitous nature, their ability to fabricate illusions, and their self-serving use of their own physiology and biology to men's disadvantage. Women's command of their own physicality and psychology is constantly at issue in the *Spill* because

it always has detrimental consequences for individual men and the general social order. The bride from Requena not only deceives her new husband, but she fools the entire town including the church authorities by manipulating the gestures of pregnancy to her benefit. The *Spill* repeatedly suggests that because of their gender women possess a body of knowledge about human reproduction and female desire that must be dominated by men if women's duplicity is to be curtailed.

The *Spill* is replete with didactic lessons like this one about deceptive women and their misguided desires. They all seem to culminate in Book Three, which is rife not only with stories like the one above, but also with authoritative reassurance from King Solomon about how to combat unrestrained and mendacious women. In this Book, Solomon visits the *Spill's* narrator in a dream and recounts in sermon form a collection of misogynist stories that mirror the tales about women along Roig's pilgrimage to the Virgin. Women's evil command of the realm of childbirth and reproduction is also criticized with regard to their imposition of unsolicited desire to birth babies. Women's sexuality and reproduction become intertwined in a passage in the dream sequence in Book Three, where Solomon is perplexed by how women who are born without a vaginal opening acquire the knowledge about how to give birth [8658-79]:

Be se n'[h]i ha
de closes nades
o no passsades;
vergens de dit,
no de sperit;
vergens de fet,
mas contra dret
dites donzelles:
ab coçquelles
ho no se com [8658-67]

These women are virgins only by name and not by spirit because through foreplay that perhaps involves tickling they become impregnated despite their physical quality that would otherwise prohibit it. Unlike the narrator's worry in recounting the story of the young wife from Requena in Book Two, Solomon is not concerned about women's loss of their honorable virginity. Rather, his lament is caused by their potentially perilous access to information. If women were to decide to use that information to satisfy their own selfish sexual or reproductive desires, the consequences could be destructive for men.

Hence, Solomon follows up this warning by justifying invasive measures to open the vagina at birth:

mas no sens hom
 ni sens plaer,
 ffills saben fer;
 ab natural
 o manual
 cert instrument,
 fforçadament
 se han obrir
 ans del parir:
 les mes ne moren,
 com se desfloren,
 les nades closes. [8668-79]

Solomon attempts to discursively control the threat of women's agency with this theory of rather violent manual aid in childbirth, followed by the threat of death upon these women's initial coital experience. Roig also implicitly counteracts the threat of women's sexual desire and reproductive control by warning them that intercourse causes their deaths. Both men imply that coitus is a threatening and dangerous act for "closed" women.

The *Spill*'s constant appeal for the control of women's many different roles in marriage and human reproduction is intimately linked to the work's larger project of showing how women adversely affect societal well-being. The *Spill*'s misogynist arguments are predicated on the idea that Valencia's social order depends upon whether men or women more forcefully manage the events of everyday life. Roig's fleeing from the plague-ridden city of Valencia in the beginning "Consulta" indicates that the city is sick, and as the *Spill* shall demonstrate, that its illness is caused by its lack of restraints against women. For instance, when Solomon addresses Roig's wish to marry in order to have male inheritors, he recounts what happens to adulterous wives in the various regions of the peninsula [6867-95]: according to ancient law, they should be stoned to death; in Castile they should be decapitated, and in Aragon hanged. But according to the statute pertaining to Valencia, the woman adulterer only receives the most benign punishment of a monetary sanction. Hence, Valencia's legal codes are too lax, especially when compared to the supposedly just sentences of the other regions, and they must be fortified to achieve stricter command of women adulterers.

In order to exemplify the beneficence of harsher mechanisms of control against women, the *Spill* overflows with an abundance of portrayals of women hanged throughout Roig's pilgrimage to the Virgin. The *metgessa* described earlier who dies by hanging is just one of a plethora of examples, all attesting to the fact that the measures taken to govern women are equal to the stability of the patriarchal

order in Valencia and in the *Spill*. The equilibrium of the patriarchal social order both in the book and in Roig's society, that is, the institutionalized conventions in men's favor such as marriage and inheritance rights, depends on the mechanisms of control established in the design and founding of the city of Valencia.

Hence, the public spectacle of women's deaths exemplifies the results of civil disobedience, which for women, Eve's daughters, is considered an essential, unavoidable quality. The staging of punishment is the performance of the social order; Roig sublimates potential societal conflict caused by wives and other women by simply negating it.⁸ To promote women's deaths is synonymous with annulling their lives and thus their potential for undermining the social organization established by men.

Roig's prescribed punishment of hanging has exemplary significance for the reader, and is fortified by its striking resemblance to a part from the *muger* entry in Covarrubias's early seventeenth-century dictionary, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*: "Vio Diógenes pendientes infamemente de un olivo a unas que la justicia había castigado con aquel suplicio y dijo: ¡Ojalá todos los árboles del mundo llevaran este fruto!: 'Utinam et caeterae arbores similem ferrent fructum!'" [767]. Just as these hanged secular women are figured as the public example of the "fruits" of disobedience in Diogenes's eyes, so are they illustrated in the *Spill* as the transgressors of official, "Roigian," patriarchal rule.

In contrast to the depiction of Eve's daughters as diseased dead "fruit" hanging from trees, the Virgin and her son always enhance men and society's well-being through their completeness and integrity. The *Spill* attempts to create a parallel between the complete, intractable Virgin and the stability of the city of Valencia, just as it indicates that Valencia's disease and disorder are produced by Eve's daughters, who are earthly women. Women and cities are shown time and again in the *Spill* to be manageable when regulated by the authority of men such as Roig and Solomon. The text suggests that because of the regimenting imposed by these men, women will cease their production of the inevitable line of abject, destructive offspring previously created, and the wholeness and stability of the Valencian social order will be restored.

⁸ Steven Mullaney discusses the implications on the early modern social order of the public staging of punishment in *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*. In Chapter Three, "The Rehearsal of Cultures," Mullaney suggests that one of the central motivations for certain Colonial stagings or performances was to create "the Other," which is what Roig promotes throughout the *Spill*. By designating women "the Other" Roig demonstrates their inferiority and deprecation in contrast to men and the Virgin.

In a parallel fashion to what Roig tries to convey in the *Spill*, the popular Valencian preacher Vicent Ferrer, in a Castilian sermon of 1411, sheds light on the weighty significance of women's relation to fruit and trees, and their further connection to the mechanisms of control in the foundation of cities. While Roig refrains for the most part from referring to particular sermons, Ferrer represents a pillar of Church and confessional authority throughout the *Spill*. He delivered the misnamed "Sermón de la 'Ave María', fecho en Santa María de Nieva" at Toledo in 1411, where he makes a compelling link between women, trees, fruit, offspring, and well-being [Cátedra 367-77].

At one point in the sermon, Ferrer illustrates Roig's assertion about how men's command of women will impede them from continuing to produce a hereditary line of monstrous offspring in Eve's daughters. He asks a rhetorical question about the existence of a tree that would bear fruit to heal every sickness and pain, claiming that if such a tree existed, then everyone would say: "¡O bendicha sea tal árbore, e bendycho sea el fructo della!" [375]. He goes on to explain that the "virginal tree" is truly the Virgin Mary, who bore the most marvelous fruit to cure all sickness, her son Jesus Christ. He tells his audience that when any one of them has an illness, they ought to go to the Virgin and devotedly *take her fruit from her*. The individual should say Jesus's name while devotedly making the sign of the cross and thinking about Christ's passion. In this way, she or he will be cured. Ferrer encourages his audience to teach this healing technique to their children, who, since they are younger and have committed fewer sins, will receive more *virtud* from the fruit. He finishes his lesson with a gloss of Romans 6: 22 that instructs the individual to *take* the fruit that is Christ, who will cure body and soul. Ferrer finally closes where he started, with his own praise to the Virgin-Tree: "Señora Virgen María, bendicho es el fructo del vuestro vientre, que es Ihesú Christo" [375].

The passage reinforces exactly what Roig tries to do in the *Spill*. It can only be understood in opposition to Eve and the sinful fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden. Eve's offspring are generated from her relations with the devil, and Ave's offspring-fruit from her direct contact with God. While Eve's fruit (women) intensifies men's ills, Ave's fruit (Jesus and all men) cures all infirmities. The contrast is also significant because of the issue current at the time regarding parental or reproductive rights over children. Ferrer encourages his audience to violate the Virgin's integrity by taking her son, unlike the ordinary women in fifteenth-century society who may have gained financial and economic benefit from giving birth to and rearing children. In reading the passage analogously with secular women, the Virgin's willingness to abdicate

possession of and control over her son stands in stark contrast to women in everyday society who would have sought to retain the right to raise their children. Jesus's unequivocal ability to heal is contrary to the female offspring of Roig's characters who collude with other women in order to destroy men. The Virgin is a pure, chaste mother who gladly gives up her son for the sake of Christian individuals. Unlike earthly women, she never claims ownership of her child. This episode seeks to subvert the rights of all women to privately determine the fate of their children, and it attempts to weaken matrilineal inheritance rights, and mothers' rights and agency after childbirth.

Ferrer's sermon seeks to achieve the same goal that Roig proposes, which is the naturalizing of the Eva/Ave opposition to ultimately justify the imposition of legal regulations for the sake of urban establishment and social order. Both men deal with images that have potentially significant ramifications for partnerships between men and women. Roig and Ferrer promote images of motherhood for the clear benefit of male citizens; wives and mothers are only useful to society when they produce men and when men regulate all facets of their reproductive processes. The fruit borne by the Virgin is only salutary and good insofar as it stands in contrast to the Edenic tree of knowledge, and to Diogenes's hanging fruit of the olive trees, the scores of nameless women encountered by Roig/Solomon on his journey towards the Virgin.

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