

Saint Rosalía of Palermo in New Spain: Gender, Miracles, and Magic

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Between 1818-1819, a few years before Mexican Independence in 1821, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, a mordant journalist in Mexico City, published the first two volumes of his novel *Little Miss Quixote and her cousin, a very true story with the appearance of a novel, written by the Mexican Thinker*, in installments. The final two volumes were published posthumously in 1831. The novel went through numerous editions through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including a lavish illustrated edition in 1897.

Lizardi's protagonist Pomposa, a young, middle-class Creole who earned the sobriquet "Quijotita" for her vanity and coquettish insistence on women's sexual power over men, decides at one point to renounce the world and become a holy woman. As a child, Pomposa had been left in the care of indigenous and mixed-race servants who filled her head with their stories of superstition and magic. Later, Pomposa and her mother fall under the influence of an old *beata*, an ignorant, excessively pious, and foolish woman. Quijotita hears ten masses a day, reads religious texts, and reacts fearfully to unidentified noises in the night believing they are evil spirits. One day she decides to imitate Saint Rosalía of Palermo by dressing in a rough robe and donning a crown of flowers. She escapes from her home at dusk carrying a trunk with a prayer book, a skeleton, and scourges, and slips out of the city to wander in the woods of Chapultepec. She imagines that angels will come to converse with her and that her prayers will work miracles. Through Pomposa, Lizardi characterizes religious zeal as irrational, retrogressive, unenlightened, and above all, feminine, dangerously open to absorbing primitive influences.

Why did Lizardi choose Saint Rosalía, the patron saint of Palermo, for Pomposa to imitate? The historical Rosalía, who died around 1160, was allegedly the daughter of a noble in the Court of King Roger of Sicily. At age sixteen she rejected her parents' home and courtly life and spent the rest of her days as a virgin recluse in a cave on Mount Pellegrino. She became famous as a protectress against plague and earthquakes after her bones, rediscovered during a particularly deadly epidemic that struck Palermo in 1624, were paraded through the city and its inhabitants were cured. The Jesuits were particularly responsible for spreading her cult throughout Europe. From the mid-seventeenth century, her cult expanded, aided by the influential paintings of Rosalía by Anthony van Dyck, who happened to be in Palermo during the 1624 plague. Sicilian Jesuits introduced Saint Rosalía's cult in Mexico and founded a mission named after her in Baja California in 1705. As protectress against disease and earthquakes, her powers especially appealed to residents of the tremor-prone land. Jesuit Luis Rincón dedicated his 1723 panegyric to Saint Rosalía published to the Creole Viceroy, who had been governor of Messina in Sicily. The censor of this work "explicitly stated that for the Jesuits—who lacked a female division—this saint, whose name combines rose and lily (the emblem of the new Bourbon dynasty), was destined to compete with the Dominicans' ascetic Saint Rose of Lima and the Franciscans' Saint Rose of Viterbo." The first Mexican images of the saint were painted in Puebla and date from the late seventeenth century (Jaime Cuadriello, in *Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790*, *Pinxit Mexici*, ed. Ilona Katzew, 2017).

Saint Rosalía's cult, then, spread into New Spain via translations (Latin, Italian, Spanish) and images circulated between Europe and the New World. Lizardi was undoubtedly attempting to counter with Enlightenment rationality this heroic vein of women's reading that he considered dangerous because it inspired in women an irrational belief in their power to perform miracles:

little better than magic in his view. His Quijotita's attempt at sainthood is inspired by vanity — she believes she will speak with the angels and work miracles— and her illusions are soon dashed by a rainstorm and a frightening noise from inside the trunk where she carries the skeleton. Ironically, indigenous “indios carboneros,” much more rational than the Creole girl, rescue the would-be saint and discover the cause of the frightening noise: a mouse inside her trunk. After Pomposa's worried parents fetch her from the indios' hut, Pomposa and her mother throw away all her religious books, hairshirts, scapulars, and metal cilice. From that point on, Pomposa dedicates herself to a frivolous social life and to the conquest of a Spanish titled noble for a husband. She ends up tricked by a swindler from Andalucía, prostituted by her mother, and she finally dies of syphilis.

Lizardi's relations with the Church were difficult and he was excommunicated for suspicions of Masonry. The numerous editions of his *Quijotita y su prima* throughout the nineteenth century, along with songs called “Gozos” and sermons about Saint Rosalía, show that the miraculous powers of the saint continued to attract women. Saint Rosalía travelled to the remote territories of New Mexico, where “alabados,” Spanish ballads, were introduced to evangelize the indigenous inhabitants. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, Saint Rosalía was a favorite among local artists who produced “santos” or simple, two dimensional images of protector saints who had specific, magical powers. These images, painted on wood, tin, or leather, adorned churches or were cherished in families' homes. Meanwhile, penitent brotherhoods maintained the tradition of singing the “alabados.” There are nineteen extant versions of the “alabado” to Rosalía.

Saint Rosalía thus circulated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries via translations from Latin to Italian and Spanish and via European high art, to inspire local iterations in New Spain. European-influenced Creoles in New Spain claimed her as her own because of her association with specific local problems like earthquakes and epidemics. In the distant territories of New Mexico, a months-long trip from metropolitan Mexico in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, both indigenous converts and Spanish and Creole colonizers alike hopefully invoked her powers as they faced the harsh conditions of the remote far north. When we consider the desperation caused by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the many different and often surprising reactions to it, we can appreciate why Saint Rosalía continued to inspire faith and hope in desperate times. Rosalía is a good example of what Charlene Villaseñor Black has called “transforming saints” as they move across national boundaries and are adapted to local needs (*Transforming Saints: From Spain to New Spain*, 2022). Lizardi's Quijotita is an example of how eighteenth-century Enlightened discourses of modernity feminized belief in religious miracles as irrational, superstitious magic and aligned it with the indigenous and primitive. However, human suffering continued, and rational discourses were not wholly able to dispel the power belief held to offer hope and solace in uncertain and difficult times.