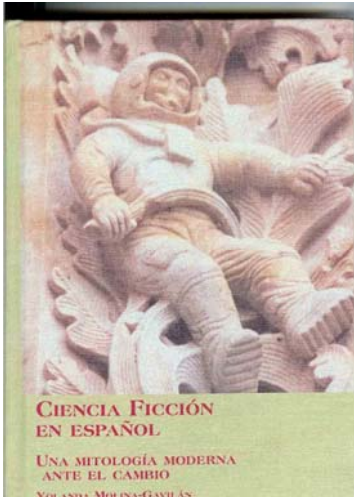


EUGENIC ORGASMS? A FRESH LOOK AT CHRISTIAN MITHOLOGY: DAÍNA CHAVIANO'S "THE ANNUNCIATION"

By Yolanda Molina Gavilán



Daína Chaviano is one of the best science fiction and fantasy writers in Spanish. Her fiction reveals a happy mixture of original subject matter and mastery of language. Although her most recent production, namely a trilogy of novels set in Havana, cannot be placed squarely within the genre, fantasy and magic play an essential part in it. In fact, in her three latest novels (*El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* 1998; *Casa de juegos*, 1999, and *Gata encerrada*, 2001), Chaviano seems perfectly at ease “code switching”, as it were, from realism to fantasy to magic to science fiction, and back again. Like Elia Barceló, another prominent science fiction writer in Spanish, Chaviano never loses sight of the fantastic, a mode of writing that Elia Barceló calls one of the “genres of the extraordinary”, the other main one being detective fiction. Chaviano’s heart, it seems, is never

too far from the genre she chose to start her writing career and the one in which she made her mark in Cuba in the 1980’s.

It was indeed difficult for Andrea Bell and me to choose one among Chaviano’s short stories to be included in *Cosmos Latinos*, our recent anthology of science fiction from Latin America and Spain, but in the end we chose “The Annunciation”, a story originally published in 1983 in *Amoroso Planeta* [*A Loving Planet*]. (This story, incidentally was later adapted as a film script by Tomás Piard and the author herself.) We chose “The Annunciation” for *Cosmos Latinos*, as I recall, because it seemed to us a perfect example of Chaviano’s style, with its easy marriage of stimulating content and highly literary form. This is, to my knowledge, Chaviano’s only published science fiction piece that has been translated into English so far, and it is one that has already been singled out by our anthology reviewers, especially Joe Sutliff Sanders, who has noticed how “The Annunciation” takes Christian mythology, a trope that has become stale in English-language science fiction and gives it a surprisingly refreshing twist. As he explains in his own words: “Anglophonic science fiction has worked over Christian imagery to the point where I groan when I read yet another instance of the sub-genre, but this story is fresh and interesting”.

What Sutliff Sanders finds surprising is that the subject matter, namely the annunciation of Christ’s miraculous conception to the Virgin Mary, remains provocative even though, to the astute science fiction reader, it seems obvious from the title that the religious event will be reinvented as some kind of extraterrestrial intervention. But the reader’s attention is captured and maintained, in my view, because of Chaviano’s daring use of eroticism on the one hand and her poetic, mystical language on the other. By the time Chaviano is done with it, the canonically religious story will be smoothly transformed into a love story, and one with cultural repercussions.

The premise is one that could easily be guessed: Christ's miraculous conception is irreverently explained in science fictional terms as the intervention of powerful extraterrestrial beings who impregnate a young Jewish woman using a method called Eugenics. The story centers on the moment when the magnificent emissary of those technologically superior beings appears to Mary. The emissary is, of course, Gabriel, who in Christian mythology is one of the two highest ranking angels and is almost exclusively known as the Archangel of the Annunciation. Gabriel is stripped here of all religious qualities. He is re-invented as a being of another reality, one who simply lives in a world where science has made an "immaculate" conception possible.

This realization, however, doesn't come before the characters and the setting have been properly defined, and our memory jogged by Chaviano's use of biblical or biblical-sounding language. In fact, the very first sentence of the story -- "It was the sixth month" -- gears us in that direction: And immediately we are introduced to Mary who is portrayed in her characteristically domestic image as a gentle housewife: "In the cool air of the alcove sweet Mary was carefully sewing her husband's clothes" (202). Nothing, in fact, points away from the traditional narrative or iconography, not even when the emissary first appears before Mary. The stranger is portrayed as the archetypal angel until he makes an unexpected move that introduces the science fictional *novum* and shakes the attentive reader before resuming the biblical language when addressing Mary:

*He was tall, and luminous white hair fell freely over his shoulders. His eyes sparkled red [...] He wore a tunic tightly fitted to his chest and fastened by a gold belt. Shoes that shone like polished bronze encased his feet. A transparent globe, similar to an aureole, surrounded his head. The stranger took the halo in his hands and gently placed it on a chair before speaking:
"Hail full of grace! The Lord be with you." (202)*

Mary's surprise is also rendered in the same language associated with the biblical story. She was not *surprised*, or *interested*, rather she was *troubled by his presence* (203), and the explanation offered by the stranger also coincides with the Old Testament right until the point when he introduces the term eugenics, which breaks the traditional discourse. At that point even the least attentive reader will recognize the story has entered the realm of science fiction. And Gabriel's speech is worth quoting so that you may savor Chaviano's style faithfully translated by Juan Carlos Toledano.

Fear not, beautiful Mary, for you have been found with grace by the great lab-eh, whose magnificent glory now rests upon Mount Sinai, whence come I to inform you of the good news. You will conceive in your womb, you will bear a son, and you will give him the name of Jesus. And He who waits upon Mount Sinai will turn His throne over to him when the time comes. Eugenics has never failed, and you have been chosen. Your son's wisdom and power will know no limits because he is called to succeed the great lab-eh on the throne during the march toward Infinity. From His seat he will reign for a long time on the voyage toward the Almighty. (203)

The great lab-eh, in this story is transformed into an extraterrestrial great leader. His temporary dwelling at the top of Mount Sinai, which got to rest there after having spewed lots of smoke and caused a deafening noise in the region, must be some kind of space ship. The ascension of Jesus to Heaven is to be understood as his leading the spaceship back to another planet where his mixed blood will serve some mysterious purpose. And, more importantly, the origin of Judeo-Christian religion is explained as the legacy of superior beings who are spiritually more developed and apparently not monotheistic, since Gabriel announces that the blood of Jesus will contain the *spirit of the gods*, plural... Christianity, then, is presented as an inferior stage of spiritual development, one to be overcome, when Gabriel compassionately tells Mary: "You haven't understood the half of our moral teachings. Instead of applying them, you've converted them into religion." (205)

Yet, despite the novelty of the provocative reinterpretation of Christian myth offered by the story, the truly surprising aspect of it is its erotic dimension. Chaviano dares to show the Virgin Mary as an erotic being, thus drastically transforming her traditional image of purity and chastity, which in Catholic worship has fueled the concept of *marianismo* so prevalent in Hispanic cultures. *Marianismo* has been described as the flip side of *Machismo*, a concept that presents the Virgin Mary as the ideal of womanhood and motherhood. Like Mary, a good woman should be pure of mind and spirit, (meaning that she is free of erotic impulses and a virgin until her marriage), and should be all generous and giving, always ready to sacrifice herself for her family and for society in general. This ideal sets a model that is of course impossible to attain, yet it is very entrenched in the culture. *Marianismo* has also been charged with the perception of women as either saints or whores and with attributing social order to the repressed eroticism of "good" women. In short, if women are to model their behavior after that of the Virgin Mary, they should happily accept the fate that is handed to them. And, since their suffering is also their redemption, they should pose no threat to a sexist social status quo.

Therefore, Chaviano's version of the annunciation attacks the concept of marianismo by challenging one of its most sacred bases, Mary's sexuality. As in the biblical story, Chaviano's Mary is chaste and virginal when Gabriel first appears, since her husband Joseph had sworn never to touch her. Her encounter with Gabriel is to be her introduction to physical love. And this meeting is told in terms of erotic attraction from the beginning, especially from Mary's point of view:

*The angel advanced through the room until he stood before her. To Mary it seemed that he was floating. He was so tall!
She bowed her head with respect and fixed her eyes on the floor.
"Look at me", he said tenderly, tilting her chin up and kissing her forehead.
"You are so warm!"
She looked obediently at him. The angel of the Lord was certainly handsome.*
(204)

In fact, Gabriel's interest in Mary goes beyond the mere scientific mission he has to fulfill. He tells her his name right away, he acts very gently, first kissing her chastely on the lips, then holding her hands and kissing them, all the while talking to her tenderly, complimenting her on the softness of her hands and the length of her hair before he starts playing with it and kissing it. In short, Gabriel speaks and acts like a man in love and ends by confessing his affection to Mary. In Gabriel's words: "Mary, I'm not doing this just because eugenics requires it. I love you" (205).

More surprisingly still, the operation that will make Mary pregnant while retaining her virginity is narrated as an erotic encounter that does not leave Mary unmoved. Quite the contrary, Gabriel's soft caresses and light kisses of her neck and lips make her tremble until "her knees began to quiver" (206). And she doesn't hesitate to follow the stranger's advice to take off her dress and enjoy the new delights she is experiencing. Indeed, the moment of Jesus' science fictional conception through "eugenics" is narrated not in scientific terms but in a mixture of religious and erotic language that at times recalls that of Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) or of Saint John of the Cross (1549-1591), the Spanish 16th century mystic poets whose descriptions of religious ecstasy have often been associated with states of erotic arousal. Describing her state, Chaviano's Mary says, "I fell so close to heaven that all of hell's heat has accumulated in my veins", or: "These...these celestial heights are not for me" (206). But Mary's last reaction to the encounter with Gabriel leaves no guessing as to its being modeled after an orgasmic response.

*"¡Gabriel!, she grabbed him tightly by the shoulders. "You are...!"
The door of the kingdom opened before both of them. She shook to her
innermost core, as if a hot spring shower had bathed the deepest part of her
seed. (207)*

So here we have the Virgin Mary, the paradigm of virtuous womanhood, as we've never seen her, enjoying the physical pleasure of an amorous encounter with a male. Love is certainly a recurrent theme in Chaviano's fiction, but in this story it has an additional dimension: it challenges Mary's sexless ness, one of the pillars of *marianismo*. By reinventing Christ's miraculous conception as the result of an extraterrestrial intervention and by giving the story a highly erotic charge, Chaviano adds a provocative dimension to that Christian myth, one that has a particularly important resonance in Hispanic cultures. Could the twisted concept by which a woman's suffering is her path to sainthood and salvation be a step closer to destruction? After all, even Virgins want to have fun!

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