LA SEBILA CASANDRA: GIL VICENTE'S POSTMODERN FEMINIST CHRISTMAS PLAY

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One of the strangest, least predictable and most eclectic of Christmas plays, Gil Vicente's *Auto de la Sebila Casandra* (1513) is also indisputably one of the best. Melveena McKendrick unhesitatingly calls it "the most inspired of all nativity plays" (*Theatre in Spain* 23). By turns hilarious and deeply serious, traditional and wildly innovative, rustic and Biblical, earthy and sophisticated, written in lyrical verse leavened with several dance numbers and no less than six exquisite songs, *La Sebila Casandra* features a sharp-witted rebel of a heroine, whose dramatic struggle completely captures our allegiance, leading to a surprising and touching conclusion — all of this in less than 800 lines.

Gil Vicente (c.1465 – 1537) was not merely the Royal entertainer and poet at the glittering Manueline Portuguese Court but also apparently the master goldsmith who created the magnificent monstrance wrought from gold brought back by Vasco de Gama's second voyage to India, still to be seen today in the National Ancient Art Museum in Lisbon. In dramatic terms *La Sebila Casandra* may be a work of comparable artistic brilliance, but at first glance it seems to violate all notions of the traditional dramatic unities. This may be because Vicente had never heard of Horace and Aristotle's canons; in any event, his clever concoction of a play has frequently been mistaken for a hodgepodge.

For Menéndez y Pelayo, *La Sebila Casandra* was a bizarre mixture of elements whipped up into a dramatic frenzy:

> Nada, á primera vista, más extravagante que este ensueño ò devaneo dramático, en que apaecen revueltos la Mitología y la Ley Antigua, lo

> historial y lo alegòrico, lo sacro y lo profano, agitándose todas figures en una especie de danza fantasmagòrico (clxxv).

George Ticknor called the play an "incongruous drama, a strange union of the spirit of an ancient mystery, and of a modern *vaudeville* ((260). Looking beneath the surface of what he perceived to be "a hodgepodge of disparate themes," Thomas R. Hart attempted to find coherence in hidden levels of theology and allegory (35). Dismissing this approach, I.S. Revah properly emphasized the play's integrity as a complex and superbly constructed work of art: "La lecture le plus superficielle de la pièce révèle un sens étonnant de la construction qui n'est d'ailleurs pas seulement théatrale, mais encore plastique et musicale" (168).

The key to appreciating *La Sebila Casandra*, as Revah discerned, is to embrace and acknowledge it as a remarkable work of art. But what sort of a work of art? For Mia Gerhardt, in her excellent survey of the pastoral tradition, Gil Vicente is "le genie de la pastorale nationale" and *La Sebila Casandra* is "un des chef d'ouvres du theater espagnol du XVe siècle…d'un ton réaliste et lèger, comme la pastorale medieval n'en connaissait guère et comme la pastorale de la Renaissance n'en trouvera plus" (140-141, 145). Leo Spitzer on the other hand makes a strong case for Casandra the central character as an essentially tragic figure (57). Manuel Calderón, *La Sebila Casandra*'s most recent editor, calls the play "un hibrido de Moralidad, Comedia y Misterio." (Vicente, ed. Calderón 81n).

It is probably more useful to put generic distinctions to the side, and focus on the origins of Gil Vicente's play. Dramatically, *La Sebila Casandra* is constructed from the materials (one might almost say, from the ruins) of two mighty medieval traditions of Christmas performance — the Shepherds Play and the Song of the Sibyl.

The *Officium Pastorum*, a liturgical enactment of the visit of shepherds to the manger on the first Christmas, spread throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages, encouraged by the proliferation of nativity crèches in churches, a custom popularized by St. Francis (Young 2: 27). The dramatic conjunction here, so fruitful for the later medieval drama, is

the meeting of humanity in the person of the shepherds with the divinity of the Virgin and Christ child. The beginnings of Spanish drama, in the plays of Juan del Encina and Lucas Fernandez, show how quickly the dramatic focus of such plays in the vernacular was drawn to the individual quirks and human exploits of the shepherds themselves. Encina was a kind of minstrel and professional entertainer at the court of the Duke of Alba, often credited with the secularization of the *Officium Pastorum* tradition. His *eglogas* (rather grandly adopting a term from Virgilian pastoral) are "essentially verse dialogues, mainly between shepherds and other rustic characters, written in a mixture of standard Spanish (for the courtly or educated characters) and *sayagués*, a local Salamancan dialect which Encina developed into a literary patois for use by comic rustics" (McKendrick, *Theatre in Spain* 11). Fernandez, a follower of Encina who also served the Duke of Alba and hailed from Salamanca, further developed the rustic characterizations and dialogue of the shepherds. His lively nativity play *Auto ò Farsa del Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo* (before 1500) features the antics of four shepherds attempting to ward off the freezing Winter cold by playing games with a ball and bat, jumping off walls and starting a fire with a tinder box (Williams 26-27). It seems likely that Fernandez visited the Portuguese Court in Lisbon, where King Manuel's three successive wives were Spanish, and the Court bilingual. It is altogether possible that he encountered Gil Vicente there.

In any event Gil Vicente begins his career as a playwright working in the new Spanish fashion. Obligingly bilingual, he would write eleven of his forty-four plays in Spanish, and eighteen in a mixture of Spanish and Portuguese. His first dramatic work *Auto de la Visitación* (1502) is a comic monologue in Spanish featuring a rustic shepherd (played by Vicente himself) who appears shyly in the actual bedroom of Queen Maria to congratulate her on the birth of her child. This bit of "reality theatre" climaxes in the entrance of some thirty followers dressed as shepherds, bearing gifts for the newborn child — eggs, milk, cheese and honey — or more likely for the audience, which included the dowager Queen Leanor. The first printed edition of Vicente's works adds a rubric indicating that Leanor was so pleased by this impromptu performance that she ordered another shepherds play for the Christmas season (Vicente, ed. Calderón 3-9).

This was the genesis of Vicente's second play, also in Spanish, the *Auto Pastoril Castellano* (1502). It presents four shepherds watching over their flocks by night, three of whom are game-playing rustics, and one, the featured performer interestingly named Gil, who is learned enough to recite both his friend's wife's family genealogy and the Biblical prophecies of a Messiah. These two early plays establish a clear connection between Vicente and his Spanish predecessors, but the participation of figures impersonating shepherds in Christmas revels at the Portuguese Court predates the plays. The Spanish ambassador to the Court of Lisbon recounts in a letter of 1500 that Christmas Matins were enlivened with "hórganos y chançonetas y pastores que entraron a la sazón en la capilla dançando y cantando 'gloria in eçelsis deo'" (Vicente, ed. Calderón xxxvii).

Another equally strong Christmas tradition, and one with a far more exotic pedigree, is the Song of the Sibyl. In the ancient world numerous sibyls (holy women or prophetesses) were known and revered, the most famous being the Sibyl/ Pythoness oracle of Delphi, the Sibyl of Cumae (a major figure in Virgil's *Aeneid*), and the Sibyl Cassandra of Greek mythology, who predicted the fall of Troy and lived to tell the tale (Kinter 2). Later the Romans would keep secret archives of Sibylline Prophecies, to be consulted in times of crisis.

The intrusion of ancient pagan female oracles and prophetesses of doom into Christmas revelry in the Middle Ages is a fascinating and complex story. As with most things medieval, St. Augustine is principally to blame for it. It was Augustine who picked up from the early church fathers Lactantius and Eusebius the text of a passage in Book Eight of the "Sibylline Oracles", supposed to be the ancient prophecies of the Roman sibyls but in reality infused with Greek, Hebrew and Christian motifs (Terry 3-5; 171-173). The passage which caught Augustine's eye, which he included in The *City of God*, purports to be an utterance of the Erythrean Sibyl, foretelling the catastrophic end of the world and a

final judgment. The 27 lines of verse in the Greek original formed an acrostic, with the initial letters spelling out "Jesus Christ the Son of God the Savior".[1]

In the sixth century this acrostic prophecy was incorporated into a contentious and notably Anti-Semitic diatribe, the *Sermo contra Iudaeos, Paganos et Arianos de Symbolo*, falsely attributed to Augustine, which then came to be adopted in part as a reading, or *lectio*, in Christmas sermons, frequently in matins for Christmas Eve. It consists of a stern warning to Jews, quoting Old Testament patriarchs and prophets including Isaiah, Moses, David, and Daniel, plus John the Baptist, Virgil and finally the Sibyl, warning of Doomsday. Throughout Europe this led on to the liturgical drama *Ordo Prophetarum*, in which the prophets and indeed the Sibyl were impersonated figures. But uniquely in Spain, the Sibyl became an independent dramatic figure in her own right (Donovan 165-167). By the tenth century the Sibyl's Doomsday verses were set to music for singing by a choir. Later this song was set for an individual voice, and ultimately for dramatic performance. This tradition became particularly strong in Castille and Catalonia.[2]

By the mid-fifteenth century, the Sibyl's song in Latin was being performed as an independent theatrical event, becoming ever more elaborate. In León a singer disguised as the Sibyl wore an Oriental costume and entered the church accompanied by drums and trumpets. By the sixteenth century the Sibyl's entrance is on horseback (Stern, "Song of the Sibyl" 329). An eyewitness account describes Matins on Christmas Eve beginning with the ringing of church bells from 10 to 11 p.m., then the appearance of the costumed Sibyl, with two choirboys in angels' costumes carrying swords, which they struck together to punctuate the Sibyl's dire prophecies. Two other choirboys carried torches. When the Sibyl's prophecy concluded, Midnight Mass would begin (Stern, *Medieval Theatre in Castille* 205).

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[1] Not only that, Augustine marvels, but "if you combine the initial letters of the five Greek words, they make the word *icthys* meaning fish, and the mystic meaning of this noun is Christ, because he has the power to exist alive, that is without sin, in the bottomless pit of our mortal lives, as in the depths of the sea" (Augustine 5, 441-447). Now we Americans know whom to blame for the little metal fish symbols with Greek letters pasted on the backs of our pious neighbors' Sport Utility Vehicles — St. Augustine, no less!

[2] The tradition continues to this day in Catalan-speaking areas. I had the pleasure of seeing a performance of the *Cant de la Sibil-la* in the Cathedral of Girona in 1992, performed by boy choristers from Mallorca (Potter 41).

These then were the centuries-old liturgical and performance traditions, which Gil Vicente adapted and astonishingly transformed for his own purposes in *La Sebila Casandra*. His purposes were to delight a courtly audience on a particular occasion. The time, place and occasion are specified in the opening rubric for the play in the 1562 printed edition of Vicente's works: "A obra seguinte foi representada a dita Senhora no mosteiro d'Enxobregas nas Matinas do Natal" [The following work was performed for the aforesaid lady in the convent of Enxobregas at Christmas Matins] (Vicente, ed. Calderón 81).

The lady in question was Leanor, sister of King Manuel and dowager Queen as the widow of the late King João II. Her patronage of Gil Vicente continued throughout her lifetime and provided the secure basis for his entire career, beginning with his earliest dramatic works and influencing the composition of some of Vicente's finest plays, including his masterpiece *The Boat Trilogy*. And patronage by female members of the Royal family continued after Leanor's and even Vicente's death. It was the intervention of Queen Catherine, widow of King João III, that made possible the posthumous publication of Vicente's works in 1562 in unexpurgated form, despite attempts at censorship by the Inquisition (Parker 22-23; 65).

As we have seen, Matins on Christmas Eve was a traditional time for paraliturgical Christmas festivities, and the location in this case was a convent in Lisbon recently founded by Leanor herself. The original audience likely included the Clarisian nuns of the convent, known to have been drawn from the ranks of the high nobility (Vicente, ed. Calderón 81 note b). The presence of a strongly female audience at the first performance of *La Sebila Casandra* is a fascinating contextual factor, little noted by previous commentators (Calderón "Una aproximación"). The exact year of the performance is uncertain, but on internal evidence most authorities support the date of 1513 (Revah 190-191).

We have very little notion of who the performers might have been, but I wish to propose a likely hypothesis — that Gil Vicente himself (identified as the solo comic performer in his very first play, and in the text of *La Sebila Casandra* as the composer of at least one of the songs) was one of the principal actors. The obvious role for him is Solomon, the comically inept shepherd and suitor for Casandra's hand. Tellingly, Solomon twice exits the stage and returns leading newly entering characters in a dance and a song — a perfect role for the author as Actor-Manager. Solomon's part includes 164 lines, making it the lengthiest role in the play with the exception of Casandra, who has 256. We can only speculate on the identity of the performer who played the role of Casandra, though the tradition of choirboys performing the roles of female sibyls offers a plausible precedent. That all the performers were male, in gender disguise as needed, seems virtually certain. The employment of women as actors in female roles in the Spanish professional theatre of the Golden Age is a later innovation imported from Italy (McKendrick, *Theatre in Spain* 49).

Entering dressed as a shepherdess, Casandra begins the play with a breathtaking attack on the institution of marriage. It's a bad idea in general, a state of captivity and alienation, and for her it is out of the question, since there isn't a shepherd in sight who is worthy of her. This is the cue for the entrance of Solomon, her clueless suitor, who imagines that their marriage is as good as arranged, since he has already talked with her aunts about it. In a withering exchange, Casandra makes it clear to Solomon that she will never marry him, or anyone else. Nor indeed does she want to become a nun. She prefers to be free.

> No me quiero cautivar
> Pues nací horra y asienta
> [I don't want to be captured,
> because I was born free and clear] (76-77)[3]

Ridiculing Solomon's promise of an idealized bed of roses, Casandra paints a vivid picture of the realities of marriage, as other women have experienced it. Husbands have all manner of bad qualities:

> Unos, de ensober vecidos

[3] Line citations are to the text in Vicente, ed. Calderón 81-111. Translations are mine.

y aborridos;
otros, de medio galinas;
otros, llenos de mil cellos
y recelos,
siempre aguzando cuchillos,
sospechos, amarillos
y malditos de los cielos.
Otros a garçonear
por el lugar
pavonando tras garcetas
[Some are pompous and boring;
others chickenhearted.
Still others, stuffed with a thousand jealousies
and suspicions, flashing their knives,
mistrustful, sallow and cursed by heaven.
Others, chasing the servant girls,
Strutting after the chicks] (126-136).

Against this barrage of rhetoric Solomon is helpless. Muttering that she must be possessed, he retreats offstage to find reinforcements. In his absence Casandra sings a jaunty song in praise of the single life, with this refrain:

Dizen que me case yo:
No queiro marido, no.
[They say to marriage I must go:
No, I don't want a husband, no!] (198-199).

The lyrical qualities of Vicente's work are astonishing, providing a succession of songs in traditional forms that give the play a rich musical as well as dramatic structure. This first song is a *zéjel*, in the metrical style of Hispano-Arabic poetry (Suárez, 145).

The second scene begins with the entrance of Casandra's three aunts, joined by Solomon, dancing the *chacota*, a joyous and playful rustic dance resembling the *fandango* (Vicente, ed. Calderón 90n; 415). By their names the aunts are clearly identified as Sibyls: Erutea (the Eritrean Sibyl), Peresica (the Persian Sibyl) and Ciméria (the Cimmerian sibyl), three of the twelve or so traditional prophetesses of legendary and liturgical fame. In medieval iconography and liturgical performance they would have been presented in elaborate Oriental dress. Vicente's choice of rustic garb for these characters ("à maneira de lavradores" [in the manner of peasants]) (s.d. 217+), is obviously deliberate. To use a contemporary theatre term, it is a comic "updating" of the old tradition, creating a dual identity for these characters, which will shift as the play progresses. At their entrance the aunts present themselves as three small-town busybodies, determined to get Casandra (an orphan, we now learn) married off to Solomon posthaste. Erutea lavishly praises his fine qualities, only to have Solomon put his foot squarely in his mouth:

ERUTEA
Es generoso
y virtuoso,
cuerdo y bien assombrado;
tiene tierras y ganado
y es loado
músico, muy gracioso.
SALAMÓN
Tengo pumares y viñas,
Y mil piñas
De rosas pera holgares;
Tengo villas y lugares
Y más treinta y dos galinas.

ERUTEA
He's generous
and virtuous,

wise and fortunate;
He owns land and cattle,
He's highly regarded,
A musician, and very witty.

SOLOMON
I have orchards and vineyards
And huge heaps
Of roses you'll love;
I have villas and property,
And more than thirty-two chickens] (254-264).

The aunts' arguments are lost then and there, though they continue to press the issue, with Casandra increasingly defiant. Peresica and Ciméria then demand that she listen to her uncles, who will surely be able to convince her. Solomon eagerly goes off to get them.

As he returns, beginning the third scene, Solomon brings with him no less than three Biblical patriarchs and prophets: Isaiah, Moses and Abraham. That they are also part of the rural community, and presumably dressed as such, is evident by their entrance dancing the *folia*, a wild and noisy carnivalesque folk dance connected with fertility festivals. The song they sing is a traditional *serranihla*, or mountain girl's song (Parker 125-127; McGinniss xix).

En la sierra anda la niña
su ganado a repastar,
hermosa como las flores,
sañosa como la mar.
[Up in the mountains the girl is walking,
feeding her flock,
lovely as the flowers,

and wild as the sea] (313-316).

With this beguiling song, obviously appropriate to Casandra's character, the play takes a surprising new pathway. Instead of hectoring, the uncles have brought her three presents: bracelets, rings and a necklace. Here are the first subtle hints that we are in fact in a Nativity play. Like shepherds or wise men, the uncles come as a male threesome, bearing gifts to a favored child. Does the obstinate Casandra now melt with gratitude? Not for a second.

¿Téngome de captivar
por el dar?
¡No me engaño yo ansi!
[I'm supposed to be captivated
by a gift?
You won't fool me that way!] (331-333).

Casandra explains that she has made a promise to herself, that she does not have to marry. Moses responds, not with barnyard blandishments, but with a stern patriarchal sermon based on Genesis, invoking God's creation of the heavens and the earth, mankind and his companion, joining them as one flesh in matrimony, the very first sacrament. This would no doubt be enough to silence the average rebellious young girl, but Casandra is made of sterner stuff. Running theological rings around her male and female antagonists (note that Casandra is outnumbered 7 – 1 on stage at this point), she proclaims her own determination to follow the highest of callings, by remaining a virgin.

Pero yo quiero dezir
y descobrir
por qué virgen quiero estar:
sé que Dios ha de encarnar,
sin dudar
y una virgen ha de parir.
[But I wish to say
and make clear

why I wish to be a virgin:
I know that God must be made flesh,
without a doubt
and a virgin must give birth] (428-433).

With this prophecy Casandra takes up her own identity as a Sibyl, proclaiming the good news of the birth of a savior. Her announcement contains hints of further disclosures to come, but her aunts seem not to notice, intent as they are to second and extend Casandra's prophecy. In doing so, they set aside their rustic preoccupations to become Sibyls themselves, Erutea predicts that the birth will take place in a manger, visited by shepherds and wise men. Ciméria goes on to describe the virgin as not merely a mother, but the Queen of the Angels, and warrior against Lucifer. Peresica goes still further into the realm of prophecy, describing a moment in which the fretful Christ Child has a premonition of his own crucifixion, as he is comforted at the breast of his mother, blissfully unaware of his destiny.

From the rustic world of the opening of the play we have moved into an entirely new dimension of time, where the birth of the savior is an event still in the future, to be distantly imagined, prophesied and praised. Nothing would have been simpler for Vicente than to have used this harmonic moment to align Casandra with her fellow Sibyls, dropping her rebellious attitude to join in the praise of the forthcoming event. Instead, Casandra confronts and confounds her antagonists with an extraordinary prophecy of her own.

Yo tengo en mi fantasia
y juraría
que de mi ha de nacer,
que otra de mi merecer
no puede haver
en bondad ni hidalguía
[I have this presumption,
and I could swear it,
that it's from me that he's to be born,

that none other than me
could be more worthy,
in goodness or nobility] (506-512).

Casandra's stunning announcement sets off angry denunciations from her uncles and her suitor Solomon. They are now convinced that she is out of her mind, but she remains adamant about her vocation.

¡Aún en mi seso estó:
Que soy yo!
[Yet in my own mind I'm certain
that I am she!] (531-532).

Determined to refute her claim, the patriarchs unleash a flood of high-flown arguments, many of them superbly lyrical. Speaking with the tongues of angels (or more properly, with the genius of Gil Vicente at his poetic best) they invoke all the natural emblems of the Virgin's humble perfection, in contrast to the vanity and presumption of the all-too-human Casandra.

Las riberas y verduras
y frescuras
pregonan Su hermosura;
la nieve, la Su blancura,
limpia y pura
más que todas criaturas.
Lirios, flores y rosas
Muy preciosas
Procuran de semejalla
Y en el cielo no se halle
Estrella más luminosa.
[The riverbanks and meadows,
the fresh breezes,
proclaim Her beauty;
the snow, Her radiance,

clean and pure
beyond all other creatures.
Lilies, flowers and roses
Strive to match her,
And in the heavens,
no star so luminous] (547-567).

From these lyrical heights Abraham reminds the audience that all these prophecies will become clear, along with the rest of God's plan, on a "profound day" in the future. The Sibyls confirm this, moving into their traditional role as heralds of the Day of Judgment. As Erutea explains, the sue signs of that impending event are in the heedlessly sinful ways of humanity.

Y cuando vieren perdida
y consumida
la vergüença y la razón
y reinar la presunción,
nesta sazón
perderá el mundo la vida.
[And when shame and reason
come to be lost and consumed,
and presumption reigns,
in that same season
shall the world lose its life] (642-647).

Uncharacteristically speechless as this indictment unfolds, now portrayed as representative of all human sinfulness, Casandra stands accused by her very own word "presumption", as the dire shadow of Doomsday falls across the play. And then, from his dramaturgical bag of tricks, Gil Vicente produces an astonishing visual and musical *peripeteia*.

Abrem-se as cortinas onde esté todo o aparato
do Nacimento. E cantam quarto anjos:

[The curtains open, revealing the apparatus
of the Nativity. And four angels sing:] (s.d. 653+)

The sight is a crèche with Madonna and child (and possibly shepherds as well) and the angelic voices belong to choristers, singing a lullaby to the baby Jesus. Thus begins the fourth and final scene of the play, as the moment of Christmas transforms the temporal dimensions of the play once again, uniting prophets, Sibyls, shepherds and shepherdesses, uncles and aunts, performers, nuns and Royal spectators, not to mention the rest of us looking in historically on this time of celebration.

The crèche is evidently at some distance from the rest of the playing space, requiring the Sibyls and prophets to make the journey together, singing and dancing the *chacota* as they go. Arriving, Peresica, Abraham, Moses and Isaiah give short speeches of praise to the Christ child. Even Solomon, transformed from chicken farmer to a learned poet (like his Biblical namesake) waxes rhapsodic, in Latin yet:

¡Oh, gran rey desde niñito
per natureza bendito,
infinito,
ab eterno capitán
[Oh great king, from your infancy
blessed by nature,
in finite,
eternally our Captain] (712-715)

When it is Casandra's turn, she speaks in an altogether more personal vein.

Señor: yo, de ya perdida
nesta vida,
no te oso pedir nada,
porque nunca de passada
concertada
ni deviera ser nacida.
Virgen y Madre de Dios,
A Vos, a Vos,

Corona de las mugeres,
Por vuestros siete plazeres,
Que quieras rogar por nos.

[Lord, I have lost my way
in this life.
I ask you for nothing,
since the past can never be
made right,
nor should I ever have been born.
Virgin and Mother of God,
To You, to You,
Crowning glory of women,
By your seven joys,
may you desire to pray for us] (732-742)

It is a strange dramatic moment for Casandra, mingling shame and repentance, hope and personal desolation. Tellingly, it is not to Jesus but to the Virgin that Casandra turns for a way out of her presumptions. In doing so, she uncovers the true heroine of the play: the iconic Virgin beyond human imitation, the image of perfection and source of grace. It is to her praise that the concluding speeches of the play are addressed, by Ciméria, Peresica and Erutea, culminating in a final song, one of Vicente's most celebrated and brilliant lyrics (brilliant enough for the rubric to specify that it was composed by the author himself) sung by the entire company.

Muy graciosa es la donzella,
¡cómo es bella y hermosa!

Digas tú, el marinero,
Que en las naves bivías,
Si la nave o la vela o la estrella
Es tan bella

[How gracious is the lady,
how lovely, how beautiful!

Tell us then, O sailor,
living there on shipboard,
if your ship or your sail or your star
is as beautiful?]

The lyric elegantly extends the comparison to the world of the knight and the shepherd. Small wonder that the illustrious humanist Erasmus learned Spanish, in order to read the poetry of Gil Vicente (King 44).

The beauty of this ending, with its triumphant praise of the feminine principle, is so winning that we are likely to forget that Casandra's dramatic dilemma remains unresolved. Are we to imagine that she now accepts the advice of her uncles and aunts, taking the hand of her suitor Solomon with his thirty-two chickens? Or is she now sufficiently dedicated to the path of virginity to take vows as a nun, taking the part of the Clarisian sisters in the audience? Or as some critics would have it, has she become a tragic figure, like her original namesake Cassandra, stealing away from all the celebration in her despair and alienation? Fortunately Gil Vicente prefers to leave us guessing, contemplating the complexity of the dramatic puzzle his play has gotten us into, and the theatrical magic with which he has whisked us out of it.

But then, before we can even begin to figure this out, he presents us with the most bizarre of epilogues – another song, but of all things a patriotic call to arms, a rousing *villancico* to send us all off to war, promising that God and the angels will fight on our side. What this has to do with Christmas is, as far as the critics are concerned, anybody's guess. Speculations include the possibility that the war is an allegorical struggle between good and evil, or an expression of medieval spiritual chivalry in the tradition of St. Bernard

and Ramon Llull, or that Vicente is showing his support for preemptive war against the Muslims — in this case, a Portuguese expedition against the Moors in northwest Africa.[4] Or quite possibly, the song may have been mistakenly attached to the play by the compliers of Vicente's complete works (Parker 45-46; Reckert "Estudio Preliminar" xiv).

Thus any attempt to deal fully with the meaning of *La Sebila Casandra* must include the admission that for all of its artistry, the play leaves us with more than a few loose ends. The disjunctive multiplicity of it is almost… (dare I say it? Yes, I think so) postmodern. The eclectic content of *La Sebila Casandra,* and the uncertainties about its ultimate message, derive from the wide variety of traditional materials it brings together. As Stephen Reckert has argued, Vicente's originality as a dramatist lies in the freedom with which he manipulates his sources, deconstructing them to produce new combinations (*Gil Vicente* 55).[5] In *La Sebila Casandra* Vicente brings together not merely the venerable traditions of the Shepherds Play and the Song of the Sibyl, but also brazenly borrows from Italian chivalric romance the whole premise of a Sibyl who imagines she is the Virgin Mary. His source is Andrea da Magnabotti di Barberino's fifteenth century novel *Guerino Meschino*, newly translated into Spanish and published in 1512, making it a contemporary work members of his audience would have every reason to recognize (Lida de Malkiel 47-61).

But leaving sources aside, in what sense is the style of *La Sebila Casandra* postmodern? In the best sense, I would say, providing we define that term carefully. I have in mind not posturing banalities masquerading as Performance Art, or endless arpeggios pretending to be music, but rather the art of our times which is rebelliously non-linear, asymmetrical, allusive, self-conscious, ironic and seriously playful — the films of Almodóvar for example, the plays of Caryl Churchill or the architecture of Frank Geary. And while it is obvious that Gil Vicente never heard of modernism, let alone post-

[4] This would be consistent with Vicente's politics in those early days of the Portuguese Empire, which seem to have been enthusiastically pro-imperialist. His play *Exhortaçåo da Guerra* [Exhortation to War] was occasioned by the same expedition to Africa.

[5] For more on Vicente as an experimental playwright, see Reckert's chapter "Teatro de la vanguardia en el siglo XVI" 29-57.

modernism, it is altogether possible that our present-day artistic context provides us with fresh ways of discovering, appreciating and even categorizing Gil Vicente's artistry in all its remarkable originality. Across the centuries he speaks to us, oddly enough, in our own artistic language.

The fluid multidimensional characterization of Vicente's pastoral prophets and rustic Sibyls— at once the embodiments of ancient truths and domestic realities, ready to burst into song and dance at the drop of a cue— defies any Aristotelian or Stanislavskian prescriptions. The irony of their multiple selves is a game in which Vicente, his audience and even the characters themselves seem to participate. As Mia Gerhardt noted long ago, Vicente's Solomon exists simultaneously in his rural barnyard and as a King, poet and Biblical Patriarch (145).

But it is in the character of Casandra that we come closest to the postmodern sensibility. Vicente's very choice of the name "Casandra" for his central character is surprising and clearly deliberate; in his source she is called Cumana.. The name Casandra not merely evokes the Trojan War and Greek tragedy, but also her legendary origins. "Because of her beauty, Apollo offered Cassandra a gift, and she chose prophecy. But her refusal to lie with the god brought a curse: that though she might predict future events, no one would believe her" (Kinter 6).

The visual image of a Sibyl, in the art of Vicente's day (best known to us in Michelangelo's twelve monumental sibyls on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel) is that of a woman of a certain age, even a crone. That Vicente's Casandra is clearly young and physically desirable is, once again, a conscious choice. And by her own description at least, she's better than any shepherd deserves:

> ¿Alguno hay que me paresca
> en cuerpo, vista y sentido?
>
> [Is there anyone equal to me
> in body, looks and sense?] (10-11).

The opening rubric of *La Sebila Casandra* lays out a very moralistic interpretation of the play's meaning.

> *Trata-se da presunçâo da Sebila Casandra que, como*
> *Per spirito profético soubesse o mistério da Encarnaçâo,*
> *Presumio qu ela era a Virgem de quem o Senhor havia de nacer.*
>
> [It treats of the presumption of the Sibyl Casandra, who, informed of the mystery of the Incarnation by the spirit of prophecy, presumes that she will be the Virgin from whom the Lord is to be born] (opening s.d., emphasis added).

In the play that follows, however, as we have seen, Casandra's dynamic personality is far more than just presumptuous, and consequently far more interesting. Melveena McKendrick, perhaps the most perceptive of recent analysts of the play, emphasizes Vicente's striking ability to project the inner, personal drama within Casandra's character.

> He does this by endowing his portrait of Casandra, consciously or unconsciously, with what might be called motivational depth. It is not only a psychological richness unusual for its time but also an enigmatic, open-ended quality…Casandra has what today would be called a neurotic obsession about marriage…Casandra is arrogant…But at the same time she is afraid of life and of what it entails in the way of compromise, emotion, passion…Her disinclination to commit herself is generalized and part of her very make-up…She has found the ideal solution: without commitment or sacrifice, without losing her purity, she can become a mother, the mother of God (Women and Society 48-50).

It is this unique psychological dimension, which leads McKendrick to label *La Sebila Casandra* "one of the most interesting of the early Spanish plays and the first in which the theme of active feminism appears" (Women and Society 45). What lightning bolt of inspiration led Gil Vicente to see, so far ahead of his time, the outlines of perhaps the central cultural issue of our era? Whatever it was, there can be no denying that women's

issues, a woman's sensibility and a vision of a new feminine identity lie at the heart of the play. In the words of a recent translator, Cheryl Folkins McGinnis, "Ultimately, Casandra foresees a liberation in which she will not be bound as a servant of bride to either God or man" (xvii). But this vision of liberation, like so many other human aspirations in the play, fades from view as the curtains open and the Nativity scene becomes the focus of the characters' and the audience's admiration and adoration, in the celebration of Christmas.

For all of its conciseness, *La Sebila Casandra* is a spacious and wondrously complicated work of art, with room for comedy and theology, song and dance, prophecy and foolishness, joy and unfulfillment. It is one of those rare masterpieces, like *The Magic Flute* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that are eclectic and imaginative beyond words, far more profound than the sum of their superbly incongruous parts.

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