



Molina, Miguel de (1908-1993)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Miguel de Molina rose from poverty to become one of Spain's most celebrated flamenco singers. His wildly popular performances reinvented a dance and music tradition that had grown stale for lack of innovation and originality. Despite his success, however, Molina's open gayness and gender-bending stage persona provoked hostile reactions that plagued his career.

The naturally effeminate Molina was forced from the stage on numerous occasions and eventually found himself expelled from two countries. Yet, despite this homophobic persecution, Molina never retreated into the closet and refused to alter his feminine stage persona.

Molina's life was as melodramatic as his music. Born Miguel Frías in a small Spanish town near Málaga in 1908, he came from a background of dire poverty.

Expelled from school when a vengeful and sexually abusive priest accused him of "unnatural acts" with other boys, little Miguel ran away to Algeciras where he found employment cleaning a brothel. Because he was only thirteen at the time, the prostitutes cared for him as mothers and even arranged for a school teacher client to tutor him.

Moving on at the age of seventeen, Molina found employment on the ship of a Moroccan prince, serving in what was essentially the prince's male harem. The prince soon fell out of political favor, however, and Molina returned to Spain where he began organizing *Tablas Flamencas*, or flamenco parties, for Granada's Gypsies.

This experience constituted Molina's first full exposure to a musical and dance tradition he already loved. By 1930, Molina arrived in Madrid where he made increasingly good money organizing *Tablas* in the capital. One year later, he decided the time had come for him to take to the stage rather than to manage it. He appeared in a production of Manuel de Falla's ballet *El amor brujo*, but soon developed his own act, which combined flamenco and cabaret.

Molina's notion was to reinvent flamenco performance by feminizing the usual macho role taken by men. He sewed enormous two-meter-long sleeves, which he called blouses, onto the traditional costume and even sang the type of *coplas*, or popular songs, normally reserved for women.

Although he danced with a female colleague, he nonetheless acquired the name "La Miguela" and immediately met with enormous success. In 1933, he gave himself the name "de Molina."

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Molina fled to Valencia and from there entertained Republican troops. Because he and his dance partner Amalia Isaura became near mascots for the Levantine Republicans, both found themselves vulnerable after the Fascist victory in 1939.

Initially, a promoter closely connected to Franco's regime contracted them to tour the country. This

arrangement protected the dancers from retribution, but in return they were paid a pitiful wage despite their popularity.

Tired of his status as war booty, Molina decided not to renew this contract once it expired in 1942. Soon thereafter, government thugs kidnapped him from the theater where he was then performing and tortured him, pulling his hair out and beating him with their guns.

Molina survived this abuse but then suffered sequestration in remote Spanish towns. Unofficially banned from employment in Spain, Molina finally fled to Argentina where he again met with great success. One year later, however, the machinations of Franco's government forced his expulsion from Argentina. Molina once again found himself in Spain without work.

In 1946, Molina fled to Mexico and soon thereafter settled in Buenos Aires, allegedly under the personal protection of Argentina's most powerful woman, Eva Perón. His customary success soon followed. Although he claimed not to have been political, his identification with Perónism caused many Argentinians to despise him. In 1960, he withdrew from the entertainment world with some bitterness.

By the time he died in 1993, Molina had regained some of the esteem in which he had been held earlier, especially in Spain. He had, after all, produced numerous theater revues, starred in many films, and established two significant signature songs that most Spaniards know by heart, "Ojos Verdes" (Green Eyes) and "La bien Pagá" (The Woman Well Paid).

According to Molina's not always reliable autobiography, the persecution he experienced at the hands of the Franco government had less to do with hostility from Franco's officials (with whom he enjoyed great popularity) than with the hatred and jealousy of a self-loathing, closeted gay functionary serving under the powerful minister of foreign affairs. Molina concluded that his nemesis begrudged him his openly gay, yet professionally successful life.

Serving Molina best through these tremendous setbacks was his unceasing creativity. By reinventing the role of the male flamenco dancer, feminizing his appearance and sound without rendering either "mannered," Molina attracted audiences well beyond the genre's traditionalists. Clothed in what seemed inverted dresses and singing songs normally reserved for women, he attracted even the roughest of soldiers to his flashy stage and movie persona.

Unfortunately, Molina never returned to live in Spain even after its transition to democracy.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Andres Mario Zervigon earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and now teaches at Rutgers University. He specializes in the art and design of Germany's Weimar period and in the painting of Britain's post-World War II era.