Sor Juana's Gaze in *Romance 48*

The essence of Sor Juana's *Romance 48* is situational: it is a response, the other half of a conversation. It invokes a dialogue and brings into focus the Peruvian who apparently inspired it. In the *advertencia* that precedes the poem, we are advised that Sor Juana is "respondiendo a un caballero del Perú, que le envió unos barros diciéndole que se volviese hombre." Even without the clarification, the text itself represents an existential reality in relation to an Other as well as in relation to another's text.

The *advertencia* allows us to imagine that Sor Juana receives word that a gentleman has come to see her or has left her something. She accepts what probably were indigenous artifacts from Chile, the "*barros*" mentioned above, and an accompanying note or poem in which this stranger, who has undoubtedly heard of Sor Juana and knows of her poetic inspiration as well as of her worldly fame as a writer, tells her she should turn herself into a man. Perhaps his poem was not openly insulting. Yet the *romance* strongly suggests that the gentleman made reference to Sor Juana's physical attraction and that she was deeply offended that his gaze should be on her "womanhood" and not on her "writerhood," if you will. He seems to have associated her success as a writer with masculinity, hence his request that she negate her sex. Her taking offense at his posture becomes apparent in the constant presence of the Peruvian in her own poem where Sor Juana's regard is directed at him and his poem, while, at the same time, her gaze is directly focused on the meaning of his request that she change herself into a man. Sor Juana frames his request in the ontological woman/artist problem.

Sor Juana begins the poem with a salutation, like a letter:

> Señor: para responderos
> todas las Musas se eximen,
> sin que haya, ni aun de limosna,
> una que ahora me dicte;

The pivotal word seems to be *eximir*. The muses, all feminine, are not only exalted by the Peruvian's lines, they are completely used up, *gastadas*, and none are left to inspire Sor Juana's poem. We can cautiously begin by pointing out an exaggerated false modesty on Sor Juana's part which serves to put down the Peruvian's poetic inspiration —she is master of a dramatic irony that says one thing in such a way as to deny it at the same time. We can also see here Sor Juana's general exaltation of women which Georgina Sabat de Rivers has discovered functioning in many of her other texts. Elevating the status of the Virgin Mary to a level with God himself, her overwhelming use of feminine nouns in *The Dream*, her frequent enumerations of female biblical and historical figures and, of course, her *villancicos* dedicated to Santa Catarina show an unmistakable desire to praise females (1991:146–56).

Indeed, as Sor Juana continues to refer to the muses, she calls them sisters and mothers:

> y siendo las nueve Hermanas
> madres del donaire y chiste,
> no hay, oyendo vuestros versos,
> una que chiste ni miste.

"Madres del donaire y chiste" associates the creative process with the female biological function through a metaphor that serves to reinforce the power of female figures in the creative process. Also the opposition of the phrase, *ni-una, no-hay-una*, from the first stanza is repeated and points to one muse among many, possibly a suggestion of the poet herself.

The next mythological figure is male and the entire stanza creates a burlesque image of both the Peruvian gentleman/poet and the Roman God:

> Apolo absorto se queda
> tan elevado de oírle,
> que para aguijar el Carro,
> es menester que le griten.

Ironically, I am reminded of Lord Byron's *Don Juan* whose quartets begin in praise of woman and whose last two lines satirically expose her. Likewise, Sor Juana begins the stanza with a traditionally Gongorine hyperbaton but ends with the image of the population shouting at Apollo (dumbfounded by the Peruvian's poem), lest he drop the sun. This unexpected carnavalesque twist places the masculine figure in an inferior intellectual position amidst the already exalted female ones.

> Para escucharlo, el Pegaso
> todo el aliento reprime,

sin que mientras lo recitan
tema nadie que relinche.

As we have just seen in the above stanza, spectators are called in as witnesses, as it were, of a spectacle, and this presence points to the community of New Spain. Here as earlier, the poet publicly satirizes the unfortunate man, definitely no match for Sor Juana's wit. The image is of Pegasus, a horse present at the recital of the Peruvian's poem, holding back his neighing, in order to give full respect to the speaker. The praise is so hyperbolic as to make the irony unmistakable:

porque sus murmurios viendo,
todas las Musas coligen
que, de vuestros versos, no
merecen ser aprendices.

Left without any possible poetic inspiration from the muses, Sor Juana then says she can only be inspired by the Peruvian himself and she asks him to be her Apollo:

Sed mi Apolo, y veréis que
(como vuestra luz me anime)
mi lira sonante escuchan
los dos opuestos confines.

Mas ¡oh cuánto poderosa
es la invocación humilde,
pues ya, en nuevo aliento, el pecho
nuevo espíritu concibe!

A new spirit has been conceived in her by the Peruvian. But not the fruit of sexual union, it is the fruit of the artistic process, of a dialogue which entails the feminine as well as the masculine: "Nuevas sendas al discurso/ hace. . ." "New paths to discourse" that are inspired by *dos opuestos confines*, two opposite confines, two ends of the earth, perhaps, Peru and Mexico, but two sexual poles as well—her poem and his inspiration for it are these two opposing forces. Apollo and the unspoken name of the poetic voice, Muse. There is a clear male/female dichotomy that begins to work here which softens her satire and, albeit not abandoning the irony, prepares the way for a more serious look at art itself and a kindlier tone in reference to the Other.

"Pensaréis que estoy burlando," "You probably think I'm joking," Sor Juana says, and then reasons that since she cannot find poetic inspiration in the poet she will give up this display of dramatic irony and move her regard from the poet to his gifts: the artifacts he has brought to her from

Chile. These Chilean vases or bowls of clay, in their humble representation of beauty, whet her appetite for Art, she says. She refers to the sharpness of the instrument that must have carved designs on them, *filis*, and concludes that it must have been the Peruvian himself that carved them. The Greek word *Filis* suggests lover, as well as file, which needs no semiotic nor Freudian analysis. Her next line refers to his attack on her sexuality connecting the idea of sharp and cutting to his request that she turn herself into a man. "I am going to muster up all the strength that I can," says Sor Juana, "but you cannot really fertilize strength, that is, make a man's essence grow artificially," and she gives a further reason:

porque acá Sálmacis falta,
en cuyos cristales dicen
que hay no sé qué virtud de
dar alientos varoniles.

Is she serious now when she says that there's no Salmacis around to give her the "who knows what virtue of male breaths"? We shall see in a moment that Salmacis is a highly charged sexual metaphor that embodies an androgynous symbol of knowledge and that by giving herself the pretended character or *persona* of a simple and naïve "dama boba" she pretends that she thinks that an androgyne's breath is only male. She negates the female half of the symbol just as the Peruvian forgot to include the female element and Sor Juana's sexuality in her creative writing process. The intentionality of Sor Juana's gaze here is no longer only to elevate the position of the female for its own sake. Her regard, her look is on the mistake the Peruvian made in not being able to accept her biological sex and possibly even her gender in relation to her work as a poet and playwright.

"I do not understand such things," Sor Juana continues, referring to the much critiqued stanza just quoted, "because, if I am a woman, no one will ever verify it." And she continues in this vein:

Y también sé que, en latín,
sólo a las casadas dicen
úxor, o mujer, y que
es común de dos lo Virgen.

In other words, she does not know anything about the virtues of men, males' breaths (or expressions?). All she knows is Latin, intellectual language of mostly only men at that time, a language that allowed her to participate in the male world. In her stance of innocence/ignorance, all she knows is that both sexes experience the virgin state, associating once again those *opuestos confines* of the male and female poets.

The word *confines* is certainly appropriate considering the historical context of Sor Juana and her Peruvian, which demanded strict adherence to hegemonic ideas that molded sexual roles. She even refers to this social force in her next stanza pointing to the fact that his drawing attention to her sexuality is very definitely inappropriate. But not only because the eyes of the hegemony see it that way, rather because sexuality is determined by the Other, by the subject-in-situation, and she will not ever be thus available for definition. The only thing she knows about her body is that since it does not incline one way or the other in relation to him, it is or should be respected as neutral, abstract,

> (. . .) cuanto
> sólo el Alma deposite.
> Y dejando esta cuestión
> para que otros la ventilen,
> porque en lo que es bien que ignore
> no es razón que sutilice.

The tone of the poem changes again here and Sor Juana, still clever, but more open with him now, refers once more to his file, his *lima*, to his attack on her being, and as she does in many other places, refers to the deadly circumstance of being special in an envious world. She suggests that he leave his *lima*, his sharp edge, in Lima and come to Mexico where he may be accepted more openly than he has been able to accept her.

Sabat de Rivers, pointing to the presence of the Other in Sor Juana's *Dream*, the intellectual Other as well as the social Other, associates this masculine presence with a desire on Sor Juana's part to negate sexuality, as if the presence of both sides would render the soul asexual:

> Cuando sor Juana lanza al Alma hacia las alturas —alma que es, al mismo tiempo, la suya propia y la del 'otro' —la hace asexual para que cada ser humano pueda identificarse con ella (el Alma) y darle así dimensiones universales.[1]

It is possible that such a desire on Sor Juana's part to identify with the soul reveals not so much an asexual and neutral image of mankind, but rather a union of the sexes, the creation of a space where man and woman can live on a plane, bound in love and not opposed by their attraction to each other.

Critics have said that Sor Juana defines her sexuality in this poem. For Octavio Paz, for example, the *Romance 48* is another expression of her sought-after asexuality, her creation of an asexual self-image, and supports his suggestion of unconscious sublimation of her lesbianism. But Paz may be guilty of the same mistake the Peruvian made: the removal of the

woman from her own literary production. It was not, then, so much a question of what the Peruvian gentleman said, but more, what he did not say and what he implied. Sor Juana seems to have filled in this gap for him, if you will, and Paz seems to have missed it.

Suggesting that Sor Juana expressed a repressed lesbianism through neoplatonic thought and imagery, Octavio Paz points to this poem in Chapter 15 of his book, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz or, the Traps of Faith*. When Sor Juana says that she cannot change herself into a man because there is no Salmacis around, Paz assumes that the hermaphroditic image inherent in the metaphor of Ovid's Salmacis, is sexual for Sor Juana. But he agrees with Méndez Plancarte in that the use of the Ovidian reference was a careless mistake on the part of Sor Juana because this fountain did not transform maidens into youths, it changed Hermaphroditus into an androgyne. Méndez Plancarte says that what Sor Juana meant to say was Iphis, who was a real female figure whom Isis changed into a man. The mythological figure of Iphis belongs to a separate story in the *Metamorphosis*. Paz bases further conjecture on this assumption although admitting that what he interprets as a sort of Freudian slip provides tempting territory for a professional psychologist:

> But maybe we do not need psychoanalysis to be able to explain this small error. To begin with, it is difficult to believe that Juana Inés, considering everything we know about her, would refer to the episode about Iphis: it was too similar to her own situation. Iphis . . . asks Isis to turn her into a man (220).

Iphis most likely represents what Sor Juana would really wish: a male body so she could be with her beloved, the Marquesa de la Laguna, Sor Juana's good friend and protector. Both critics, readily willing to admit that the poet has made an essential error in the use of an Ovidian image of the *Metamorphosis*, totally forget or consider irrelevant two very important facts in Ovid's myth of Salmacis: 1) Hermaphroditus, a male love-child of Aphrodite and Hermes, is also converted into the androgyne along with Salmacis, and 2) Salmacis, the name of a sensuous fountain, is also a sexually aggressive heterosexual female (Ovid, Book IV). Ironically, Paz briefly outlines the Salmacis myth and mentions Sor Juana's reference to hermaphroditism, but leaves that reference unexplained (220). Here is the story of Salmacis, a story that two of Sor Juana's most well-known critics cannot accept as part of the textual message of the *Romance 48:*

It begins when Hermaphroditus, who wanders by the shores of undiscovered rivers and unimagined places because he delights in the unknown, finds Salmacis, a Naïde, the only nymph unknown to Diana, who resides by a fountain: symbol of the unknown which is the object of Hermaphroditus' desire. Salmacis falls madly in love with Hermaphroditus

when she sees him; but he repulses her and, so, she tells him that she will leave him alone. But she hides instead. After a time of thinking himself alone and lingering by the shore of the fountain, Hermaphroditus is seduced by the pool of water itself —its clear warm-cool liquid, soothing and irresistible, acts on him and he disrobes and enters the water to the absolute delight of Salmacis hiding in the bushes. She flings off her clothes and dashes into the water too, attacking him, clinging, embracing, kissing him while breathlessly panting. But she still remains chaste. Ovid compares her to a serpent, symbol of knowledge, and also to ivy, and he compares Hermaphroditus to figures that correspond to the serpent and the ivy: an eagle, and an oak tree. The metamorphosis that Salmacis and Hermaphroditus undergo is to become an eagle with a snake entwined about its legs. The image of a flying eagle with a snake wrapped around his legs, as seen in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, also recalls Quetzalcoatl, who, curiously, is represented as a plumed snake in Aztec renderings of him. In the metamorphic myth, the bodies of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis become one, the Hermaphrodite figure, and anyone who enters the fountain of Salmacis after that must leave its waters half man and half woman.

It is clear to me that Sor Juana made no mistake in choosing her images in this poem and it is also clear that her voice, at least here, is heterosexual. She approached the Peruvian as a woman and as an artist and tried to enlighten him to the fact that the artistic process, not her own body, is androgynous. Not only the use of the Salmacis metaphor, but her invocation of the Peruvian, "Be my Apollo," points to an ironic coquetry, not a flirtation, a tease. In commenting on Sor Juana's phrase, "If true that I am a female," Paz says that she "diminishes and almost places in doubt her female condition." I argue that she is cleverly rebuking the *caballero* from Peru, implying that "none of you gentlemen will ever know for sure." She seems to be asserting her sexuality and artistic dignity at the same time. The jauntily erotic basis seems an intentional background for a discourse of art and knowledge which she roots in the androgyne/hermaphrodite archetype. The discourse moves from sex to gender, female *persona* to androgynous symbol, particular to universal. By employing such a metaphor as Salmacis, Sor Juana brings an image of heterosexual aggression to bear on her poem, an inversion of the dominant ideology and an indication that she was aware that "Female-authored work cannot escape varieties of sexual malaise; identification with dominance has colonized most imaginations" (Munch 251). Even more compelling than her awareness that her identity is defined in relation to the world in which she lives, is her ability to demonstrate such awareness through the construction of situations—relation in situation. Thus even the static world of Colonial, Creole Mexico filters through her gaze to reflect a mutable

space that can at once be intimate and public, saintly and erotic, reproachful and attractive: an image that may not yet be harmonious with the confines of our own gaze resting on the achievement of a Catholic nun in the New World.

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NOTE

1. From an article in publication, "Mujer, ilegítima y criolla: En busca de Sor Juana," *El Discurso Colonial*. Caracas, Venezuela: Academia de la Historia, Universidad Simón Bolívar and OSU Quincentenary Committee.

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