

Toward a Reinterpretation of the *sabio rey solimitano* in Fray Luis' "Las serenas."¹

Though literary critics have long recognized the relevance of comparing the language and themes of Fray Luis' poetry to his theological prose, most comparisons of this nature are limited in scope, dealing only with a fraction of Fray Luis' doctrinal writings.² This is hardly surprising given the range and depth of his theological inquiry and the patience needed to grasp the variety and scope of his intellectual endeavors.³ Nevertheless, there is a real and vital relationship between Fray Luis's poetic corpus and the entire body of his theological writings which render them an indispensable tool for the analysis of his poetry. The identification of the *sabio rey solimitano* in "Las serenas," his ninth ode, is a case in point, one which highlights the very real need to read through all of his prose works to discover those passages which both parallel and clarify the motifs found in his poetry. Although contemporary criticism has unanimously considered this reference to be an allusion to King Solomon of Israel, a thorough examination of the Biblical evidence for this interpretation suggests that David, not Solomon, is almost certainly the *sabio rey* to whom Fray Luis refers. Significantly, this argument is also confirmed by Fray Luis himself in his theological prose works.

Since the mention of the wise king in the ninth ode occurs in close proximity to another obscure reference found there, it is best to commence with an analysis of the text itself. The reference to the *sabio rey solimitano* is a key element of Fray Luis' exhortation to a hypothetical interlocutor, Cherinto,⁴ to be vigilant against temptation. As the title of the work suggests, the most extensive poetic allusion is to Homer's *Odyssey* and the prudence of the eponymous protagonist in the episode of the sirens. However, Fray Luis does not limit his attention solely to that incident, but rather draws strategically upon a series of images and allusions to fortify his admonition against sexual indulgence. Stanzas one through four present a series of metaphors that illustrate the deceptive nature of lust—the "dorado vaso" (1-2), the "sabrosa miel" (3) which later becomes wormwood (5-6),⁵ the lovely but toxic "azucena" (7), the "purpúrea rosa" (8)⁶ which poisons the soul (9-10), and the flowery meadow which conceals a venomous serpent and a snare (11-15)—while stanzas five and six depict those who fell victim

to Circe's allure and were transformed into swine. Then, in stanza seven, Fray Luis adjures Cherinto,

No fies en viveza;
atiende al sabio rey solimitano;
no vale fortaleza:
que al vencedor gazano
conduxo a triste fin femenil mano. (31-35)⁷

The proximity of the *vencedor gazano* to the allusion which is the subject of this study obliges us to consider both references together. Indeed, the relationship between the two epithets is pivotal to our understanding of Fray Luis' message in this passage.

It is generally accepted⁸ that *el vencedor gazano* refers to Samson, whose many military triumphs over the Philistines brought him enduring glory, particularly in the case of his final conquest in the prominent Philistine city of Gaza.⁹ After Delilah betrayed him and turned him over to the Philistines, Israel's mortal enemies, they gouged out his eyes and made him their slave, and he was taken to Gaza, one of the Philistines' principal cities, where he was subjected to forced labor. When the residents of Gaza brought Samson to one of their great banquet halls as a source of amusement, he who had been their nemesis besought God and was granted one last demonstration of his superhuman strength. In the center of the house, the now-sightless judge grasped the two great central pillars on which the hall rested. Pulling them down, he caused the entire edifice to collapse. Samson himself was killed in the downfall of the building, but along with him all the assembled Philistine leaders perished. The Bible states that the number of adversaries killed through this last feat of strength was greater than the sum of all those slain by him before his death. The fact that this vengeance was accomplished in Gaza explains why Fray Luis would refer to Samson as *el vencedor gazano*.¹⁰ There appears to be no reason to question this interpretation.

The identification of the *sabio rey solimitano* is somewhat more problematic, however. Cuevas, in an opinion echoed by other editors of Fray Luis' poetry,¹¹ writes, "Salomón, rey de Jerusalén, que mantuvo relaciones carnales con mujeres moabitas, ammonitas, idumeas, etc., por cuya influencia cayó en idolatría (3R 11, 1-8)" (*Poesías completas* 124). The fact that this assertion is repeated by other critics does not detract from certain notable inaccuracies.

For instance, the reference to fornication (“mantuvo relaciones carnales”) adduces a propensity to lechery that is not supported by the Biblical passage Cuevas cites. His inference of an unrestrained sex drive appears to have been based on the number of wives Solomon accumulated.¹² However, the verses Cuevas cites, while confirming the charge of idolatry, offer no support whatsoever for the imputation of sexual impropriety.¹³

The allegation of cupidity is even more implausible in light of the political nature of many of Solomon’s marriages, as we find in 1 Kings 3.1, which describes the marriage early in Solomon’s reign to the princess of Egypt as a “marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt.” The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* affirms the political nature of this marriage, stating that “he made a marriage alliance with the reigning Pharaoh” (1288). The *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible* notes that Solomon made other matrimonial alliances as well, explaining that he “entered into numerous political marriages” (947).

An analysis of Solomon in comparison with other Biblical models also appears to contradict the association that contemporary critics have striven to demonstrate between him and the motif of temptation. Indeed, the Scriptural record of Solomon’s life reveals nothing which could illustrate the dangers of adultery.

In addition, we must also consider the fact that he wrote both extensively and emphatically in Proverbs about the foolishness of allowing oneself to be enticed by prostitutes and other men’s wives. In the strongest possible terms, he urges the readers, whom he addresses throughout the book of Proverbs as “my son/s,” to abstain from profligate behavior and flee sexual immorality, whose ravages he describes in vivid, frightening detail.¹⁴

In contrast, another Israelite ruler, David, who ironically was Solomon’s father, is a classic example of a man whose life was tragically marred by a failure to control his sexual urges. Though David experienced many triumphs early in life,¹⁵ and though he was called “a man after [God’s] own heart,”¹⁶ when he was subsequently crowned ruler of all Israel and was at the peak of his power he allowed himself to be governed not by prudence but by desire. Having seen Bathsheba from the roof of his palace, he sent for her and committed adultery with her, later arranging to have her husband killed in battle in an attempt to cover up the pregnancy that resulted from their unlawful relationship.¹⁷ Thus, in comparison to Solomon, David’s life is an

eminently more suitable illustration to be held up as a warning to young men like the hypothetical Cherinto.

Another element of doubt arises when we examine the reference in "Las Serenas" to the king's wisdom ("el *sabio* rey solimitano," emphasis added). The mere fact that Fray Luis mentions the wisdom of an Israelite king should not be taken as a corroboration of the commonly held assumption that it refers to Solomon. Although the Bible states that Solomon was wiser than any king who came before or after,¹⁸ it also attributes formidable wisdom to David. In David's younger years, when Saul was ruler of Israel, he was appointed to be one of Saul's commanders, and he led the king's troops with amazing aptitude, especially in light of the fact that his most recent assignment had been tending his father's sheep. 1 Sam. 18.5 says that "David went out whithersoever Saul sent him, and behaved himself wisely,"¹⁹ wisely enough in fact that he gained the admiration of the entire populace and came to be feared by Saul for the great respect that he had won.²⁰ David's sagacity was also evident later in legal matters: when he became king and judge over Israel, a woman who had come to him for justice and protection said of him, "As the angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and evil,"²¹ and reiterated this opinion three verses later, avowing that David was "wise, like the wisdom of the angel of God, to know all that is in the earth."

A final contention concerns the meaning of the word *solimitano*. This term is not, as may be supposed, a derivative of Solomon's name, nor is it in any other way a direct reference to the author of the Proverbs. It is, in fact, nothing more than an adjective meaning, "from Jerusalem," as Fray Luis himself points out in his treatise on the Song of Solomon.²² Given that Jerusalem is the city which David established as the capital of his kingdom, and that it was known thereafter as the "city of David,"²³ it seems most probable that the use of *solimitano* would refer to him, not to Solomon.

Significantly, in two separate passages from his own prose work, Fray Luis has already clarified the matter in such a way as to eliminate any doubt or confusion we may have in this context. The first section of his writings to which we may turn is found in his treatise on Job. In the analysis of the second chapter thereof, he states, "la prosperidad a Salomón le arruinó" (*Obras completas castellanas* 2: 60). Thus, according to Fray Luis, Solomon's decline was attributable to material indulgence, not to any sexual misconduct. The fact that Fray Luis identifies opulence as the cause of Solomon's demise in this exegesis makes it unlikely

that he would contradict himself elsewhere in his writings by suggesting that the sovereign's weakness was licentiousness. Fray Luis' intellectual consistency throughout his works makes the insinuation of such a discrepancy seem implausible.

The second key passage is located in Fray Luis' "Reflexiones varias."²⁴ In a portion of the reflections entitled "De la guarda de los sentidos," he comments on the importance of keeping a watch on the senses, noting that "Ejemplo tenemos en David, que miró a Betsabee, y en Sansón, que se aficionó a Dalila" (*Obras completas castellanas* 1: 872). This passage contains two crucial testimonies to the connection between the *sabio rey solimitano* in "Las serenas" and David.

First, we notice that this section of the "Reflexiones" deals with the need to exercise vigilance with regard to what one sees. The title of this reflection patently announces that it has to do with guarding what a person takes into his mind. David is mentioned because he "miró a" Bathsheba (emphasis added), and Samson because "se aficionó a" Delilah (emphasis added). This focus on what comes into the mind through the portal of the eyes is echoed in "Las serenas," the first stanzas of which, as previously noted, contain a string of references to things that delight the eyes but in reality are deadly traps.²⁵ Thus, "De la guarda de los sentidos" is thematically linked to the poem in question.

The second, and for us the most significant tie between the "Reflexiones" and "Las serenas," is the fact that both works offer two men as proof of the importance of the matter being dealt with. "De la guarda de los sentidos" presents David and Samson by name and in that order. Similarly, "Las serenas" mentions *el sabio rey solimitano*, most probably David, and *el vencedor gazano* which is unanimously conceded to be a reference to Samson.

These prominent similarities resoundingly confirm our conclusion regarding the king referred to in "Las serenas": in theme, examples cited, and even in the order in which the examples are presented, the "Reflexiones" and the portion of "Las serenas" are obviously parallel. When we study the content of the "Reflexiones" alongside that of the previously mentioned passage from the treatise on Job, it is evident that Fray Luis' prose confirms our stance regarding the identity of the king referred to in "Las serenas". The weight of these two passages from his doctrinal treatises together with the aforementioned Biblical considerations leads us to the inevitable conclusion that Fray Luis was thinking of David when he referred to the *sabio rey solimitano*, not Solomon as contemporary critics have maintained.

This example demonstrates the necessity of considering Fray Luis' entire corpus, both prose and verse, as a thematic whole. It also points out the fundamental intertwining of his theological perspectives and his lyrical allusions.

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Notes

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² For example, González compares the use of darkness in the *Nombres de Cristo* and Fray Luis' poetry. Thompson examines the relationship between his trial and several of his theological works, but does not attempt to link those observations to his poetry. Toledo Renner discusses the relationship between Fray Luis' Spanish prose works and his poetry, but limits her study to those poems she judges to have been written during his incarceration. My doctoral dissertation is the only study of which I am aware that integrates Fray Luis' complete Spanish works with his entire poetic corpus.

³ In García's edition of Fray Luis' complete Spanish works, his prose comprises over 1,400 pages.

⁴ Regarding classical antecedents of "Cherinto" in the *Corpus Tibullianum* and in Horace, see Cuevas, *Poesías completas*, 123 and Fernández-Morera and Bleiberg 50.

⁵ Both the "dorado vaso" and the "sabrosa miel" have Biblical antecedents: "Like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross are burning lips and a wicked heart" (Prov. 26.23, New American Standard translation; unless otherwise noted, this is the version which will be quoted hereinafter); "For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and smoother than oil is her speech, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood..." (Prov. 5.3-4).

⁶ Covarrubias notes, s.v. *rosa*, "Dedicáronla a Venus por su hermosura, y por su suave olor; y no sin misterio, porque así como la rosa en breve espacio se marchita, así se passa el deleyte carnal, porque la rosa es symbolo del placer momentáneo" (915).

⁷ Citations of Fray Luis' poetry are taken from Blecua's edition.

⁸ For example, García 2: 762, Seres 83, Fernández-Morera and

Bleiberg 50, and Cuevas, *Poesías completas*, 124.

⁹Judg. 13-16 records the life of Samson.

¹⁰Judg. 16.25-31. Some critics (for example, Cuevas, *Poesías completas*, 124, and Fernández-Morea and Bleiberg 50) have cited an earlier incident in which he uprooted Gaza's city gate and carried it on his shoulders to the top of a nearby hill (Judg.16.1-3), yet not a single resident of Gaza was harmed at that time.

¹¹See, for example, Macrí 338, Durán and Atlee 95, Fernández-Morera and Bleiberg 50, Seres 83, and Gutiérrez Díaz-Bernardo 116.

¹²Compare, for example, Cuevas' earlier statement, *Fray Luis de León y la escuela salmantina*, 296: "Salomón, rey de Jerusalén, quien, contra el mandato divino, se unió lujuriosamente con mujeres moabitas, ammonitas, idumeas, etc., hasta tener 70 esposas y 300 concubinas, que le llevaron a adorar a los ídolos; *III Reg, XI, 1-8.*" The passage actually states that Solomon had 700 wives, not 70.

¹³By my count, 1 Kings 11.1-8 contains no less than nine references to Solomon's descent into idolatry; however, there is no reference to any form of sexual misconduct. Indeed, nowhere in the entire Bible record of Solomon's life is any such transgression suggested.

¹⁴For example, "the one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it. Wounds and disgrace he will find, and his reproach will not be blotted out." (Prov. 6.32-33). Of the dangers of visiting a prostitute, he cautions, "Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths, for many are the victims she has cast down, and numerous are all her slain. Her house is the way to Sheol, descending to the chambers of death" (Prov. 7.25-27). He says of a man who has given in to the temptation of a harlot, "he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool, until an arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life" (Prov. 7.22-23). See also Prov. 2.16-19; 5.3-23; 6.24-31; 7.1-21, 24; 9.13-18.

¹⁵E.g., defeating Goliath (1 Sam. 17), and other significant military victories (1 Sam. 18.5, 23.1-5; 30.1-20).

¹⁶1 Sam. 13.14.

¹⁷2 Sam. 11.

¹⁸In response to God's offer to give Solomon anything he wanted, Solomon requested wisdom and discernment, in order that he might rule justly. God responded by giving him more wisdom than any person has ever had, before or since, and by also adding the things that Solomon

had not requested: long life, riches, and dominion over his enemies (1 Kings 3.5-14).

¹⁹ 1 Sam. 18.5, King James Version (KJV). While the New American Standard translation (NASB) is a more modern and comprehensive translation and uses more current language than the King James Version of 1612, the KJV does a better job of conveying the literal sense of the original languages of the Bible in certain passages, such as this one. Here and in the succeeding instances throughout 1 Sam. 18 (verses 14, 15, and 30), the Hebrew word *sakal* is translated in the KJV as “behaved wisely,” while the NASB renders the word as “prospered.” An examination of both Young and Strong’s biblical concordances suggests that the KJV is probably closer to what the chronicler had in mind. Moreover, the Vulgate, with which Fray Luis would have been intimately familiar in addition to the original Hebrew text, translates these verses similarly: “prudenter se agebat” (1 Sam. 18.5), “prudenter agebat” (14), “Vidit itaque Saul quod prudens esset nimis, et coepit cavere eum” (15), and “prudenter se gerebat David quam omnes servi Saul” (30).

²⁰ When people began to sing songs about David’s triumphs and to attribute to him more slain enemies than to Saul, “Saul became very angry, for this saying displeased him; and he said, ‘They have ascribed to David ten thousands, but to me they have ascribed thousands. Now what more can he have but the kingdom?’ And Saul looked on David with suspicion from that day on” (1 Sam. 18.6-9).

²¹ 2 Sam. 14.17.

²² “*Solimitana* es como jerosolimitana o mujer de Jerusalén, como llamamos romana a la mujer de Roma; y esto porque Jerusalén se llamó antiguamente *Salem*, como la llama la Escritura sagrada” (*Obras completas castellanas* 1: 174).

²³ 2 Sam. 5.6-9; 6.10,12,16; 1 Kings 2.10; 3.1; 1 Chron. 5.2; 11.4-7. For extrabiblical corroboration, see *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*; s.v. “Jerusalem” confirms that it was known as the “city of David” after the former shepherd established it as his capital (732). See also the *Illustrated Dictionary and Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. “city of David” that reads, simply, “See Jerusalem” (237).

²⁴ First published in 1888 by Padre Conrado Muiños, the *Reflexiones varias* are found as addenda to Fray Luis’ “De nueve nombres de Cristo,” a work which is similar to but separate from his more widely known *De los nombres de Cristo*. Vega has demonstrated the authenticity of this text.

²⁵ The “dorado vaso” (1-2); the “sabrosa miel” (3) which later becomes wormwood (5-6); the lovely but toxic “azucena” (7); the “purpúrea rosa” (8) which poisons the soul (9-10); and the flowery meadow which conceals a venomous serpent and a snare (11-15).

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