

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF TEACHING EROTIC POETRY

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Although as Mario Vargas Llosa has categorically claimed, without eroticism there is no great literature, and whether or not we admit it, most people are interested in sexuality and its technocracies. Erotic poetry still represents a dark side and a hidden face of literary history, especially for the Spanish Golden Age. That type of verse has often been subjected to prejudice, marginalization, or outright rejection as being in poor taste, not “real literature,” or as unworthy of its authors and, consequently, academic study (see, in this vein, Díez Fernández, “Asedios al concepto de literatura erotica”). Those attitudes notwithstanding, the erotic has been a vigorous, if not always acknowledged countercurrent throughout Spanish literary history, one with its own purpose, language, and aesthetic. Because it has received less critical attention than other aspects or modes of early modern verse, teaching it presents a series of particular challenges and rewards. Burlesque and erotic works—I connect the two because Golden Age erotic poetry is often humorous and linked to what has been called, post-Bakhtin, the “carnivalization” of the world—complete the panorama dominated by Petrarchism and other idealizing poetic currents whose tenets they often question, subvert and parody.

There is no doubt that a number of perceptive analyses have been published on early modern Spanish erotic works; some of these are listed in the “Critical Studies” section of my bibliography. However, in recent years the study and teaching of erotic literature is experiencing a veritable mini-boom in its reception, although many issues still need to be resolved in this revisionist venue. Because the history of this literature is still to be constructed, its representative understudied texts provide ample opportunity for students to do original research in early modern lyric, a field in which they at times feel that “everything has already been done.” Erotic literature thus provides a rich fount to instill in students the fact that Golden Age literature is neither outmoded nor out of touch with twenty-first century theoretical and social concerns.

Both graduate and undergraduate students—I contend—can and should be introduced to the diversity of erotic poetry. Because it is written in the most standard forms (sonnets, *romances*, tercets, *décimas*, and traditional popular meters) and excels in the use of metaphor, it is particularly successful for presenting or reviewing prosody, metrics, tropes, and poetic language with undergraduates. As we know, in terms of the mechanics of analyzing verse, most handbooks of poetry and poetics deal with the technical scaffolding on which erotic poetry is built. My usual practice, then, is to include several erotic compositions in my undergraduate poetry courses to demonstrate how notions of sexuality and the erotic differ over time, and especially how canonical poetry can be read on many different symbolic levels. For example, we explore *erotismo a lo divino* in San Juan's "Noche oscura," the rhetoric of female desire in Sor Violante del Cielo's "Si vivo en ti transformada," the erotic dream *topos* in Quevedo's "¡Ay, Floralba! Soñé que te... ¿Dirélo?" and the linguistic subtleties of the fragmented, eroticized female body in Góngora's "La dulce boca que a gustar convida."

At the graduate level, I begin by presenting the issues involved in delimiting the field and pointing out difficulties students will encounter in studying eroticism. We address the problematic differences between love poetry, erotic poetry, obscene poetry, and "pornography." To initiate discussion we focus on a series of pertinent views from scholars on the topic, analyzing their findings and the possible limitations of their arguments. The point of that initial exercise is to tease out the different meanings (then and now) of "eroticism" and to forestall possible anachronistic readings of the poems we will read subsequently. Following is a selection of those critical texts:

1. "It is necessary to distinguish between erotic poetry and love poetry. Erotic poetry is about sex and sexual love; love poetry tends to avoid sexual details, though there are exceptions [...]. Erotic poetry tends to concentrate on the more physical aspects of love and passion; while love poetry dwells more on the nobler manifestations of love, the 'higher' feelings" (Cuddon 304).
2. "La escritura erótica que arranca del cuerpo—mujer u hombre—puede conducir al elogio de la persona amada en su integridad y plenitud; a la más exaltada emoción amorosa, incluso a la espiritualización y alegorización del amor, es decir, continuar mucho más allá del cuerpo. Claro que existe algo como un *continuum*, o un territorio compartido, entre la simple sexualidad, el erotismo y la pasión amorosa; o una movilidad, si se prefiere, y unas tendencias latentes, en ambas direcciones, que conducen de lo uno a lo otro" (Claudio Guillén 242).

3. "La realidad que sirve de base a este armazón teórico—el erotismo—no es un axioma científico, sino una variable cultural de múltiples y complejas implicaciones, una inquietud humana universal y constante, pero siempre en continua mutación. Los estímulos, los mecanismos, los dispositivos de producción del deseo están íntimamente vinculados al sistema de valores—incluidos los literarios—de una sociedad en un momento histórico, y es desde esa perspectiva desde la que tenemos que analizar esa exudación del deseo que es la literatura erótica" (Cerezo 17).
4. "I understand by the term *pornography* a modern system of discourse that creates and defines a category of unsanctioned sexual representation, and am warned not to substitute it for the discourse engaged in the sixteenth century in Italy. Since both the particular application of the word *pornography* and the specific discourse it defines are modern inventions, they should not be imposed anachronistically on earlier periods, especially since such an imposition usually ends up substituting our values for those of other times" (Talvacchia 104).

The ensuing debate about the foregoing views, or others similar to them, brings to light and helps to allay any possible discomfort students might have with studying sexually explicit works. At the same time, this initial discussion can demonstrate that our notions of eroticism are frequently vague, diffuse, and unstable; that eroticism is a mercurial concept very much grounded in contemporary notions of sexuality and readers' personal, moral and literary standards. These can often lead us to apply moralizing criteria to such texts, when our concerns are predominantly aesthetic and analytical.

After this exchange of ideas we discuss how each epoch, or even generation and/or movement, deals with the physical in a different way and establishes distinct limits on its expression. I bring up examples such as the early modern fetishized female foot (a compulsion easily made current by references to the Manolo Blahnik obsession relished by the protagonists of the television program "Sex and the City"), the conventional use of coarse lexicon such as *culo*, *coño*, and *carajo* for shock value (cf. today's rap lyrics), and the presence of *double entendres* whose secondary meanings are easily deciphered from context (for example, *zanahoria-cirio-llave* for penis; *casa-fragua-cerradura* for vagina). Examining those referents leads to discussion of conventional Golden Age topics such as carnal love, corporal and sexual references, prostitution and cuckolds, and the contrapuntal existence of philogyny and misogyny as integral parts of the early modern mindset. Ultimately, these perusals can lead to an overall discussion of counter-discourses, although the primary emphasis should be on textual analysis.

After we have delimited the field, I present the circumstances which have hampered its study, for example, the lack of substantive lexicographical, stylistic and sociolinguistic studies by which we can examine erotica and contextualize it appropriately within the current Golden Age canon. Specific components of writing and historical reception take on a special significance: Who wrote erotic poetry and for whom? How was it disseminated and where? Why the close link between the production of erotic poetry and the monastery? Given that much of this poetry is addressed to women, did they read it, under what circumstances, and how would it have been received by them? If there is time, these discussions can be placed within the context of what is a “minor” literature *vis-à-vis* the building of a canon.

Primordial, of course, is the issue of censorship, official or extra-official, which bowdlerized and expurgated verse (see Armistead) based on religious, political, or often hypocritical moralistic criteria. One example of this process is the puritanical cover-up of medieval erotic literature performed by nineteenth-century critics such as Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo in order to defend against all odds an image of Spanish medieval literature as chaste, moral, and didactic. Such a line of criticism reduces the erotic complexities of Juan Ruiz’s *Libro de buen amor*, for example, to the history of a sinner deeply engaged in a battle with the flesh who strives to attain moral redemption through repentance (López-Baralt and Márquez Villanueva, *Erotismo en las letras hispánicas* 12).

Other obstacles remain. Erotic poetry often suffers from the additional repudiation (by some critics and often the poets themselves) of the burlesque and satirical mode as inferior to “serious” poetry since a good deal of erotic lyric is closely aligned with humor. This sort of false disclaimer should not always be taken at face value, of course. A serious hindrance to the study of eroticism is the historical lack or limitation of channels of material transmission. Most erotic poetic texts were not published but circulated in manuscripts, forming an alternate and largely underground literary tradition. Whenever such poetry was published, it was usually in the type of limited editions which tend to fall directly into the hands of collectors or are otherwise difficult to obtain. The manuscripts which do exist can be mutilated by censors and appear with sections crossed out or deleted and with pages missing. This material progression in and of itself provides abundant possibilities for research in textual genetic criticism. A few key examples in power point of this type of censorship bring home this point to students very well. The circumstances described above, one can emphasize, have led to a scarcity of texts, although that situation is being remedied now with the publication

of editions of individual erotic poets and collections (see Primary Texts listed in my bibliography). In this regard, the publication of the anthology *Poesía erótica del Siglo de Oro* [PESO] by a trio of French scholars in 1983 marked a watershed, and the volume, with its very useful glossary of sexual terms, still serves somewhat as a Bible (and primary text) for researchers in the field.

A final obstacle (or opening, from my perspective) is the veiled prejudice in academic circles that considers eroticism to be a minor genre or mode, of interest only in terms of language and customs, but without literary merit. Such attitudes are indefensible when we consider the great Golden Age poets (Lope, Góngora, and Quevedo, to name only three) whose erotic output is still understudied. These are the type of fastidious value judgments—I stress to students—that must be overcome when one engages in scholarship on the erotic, because we cannot apply to it unthinkingly the same concepts of aesthetic beauty and value as we do to “serious” poetry. For this reason, in my seminars we spend a great deal of time discussing what constitutes a “good” or “bad” erotic poem. I start off by juxtaposing three or four quite different compositions, such as the following, to serve as analytical models:

- 1) Besóme el colmenero,
que a la miel me supo el beso.
(Lírica española de tipo popular 104)

- 2) No a las palomas concedió Cupido
juntar de sus dos picos los rubíes,
cuando al clavel el joven atrevido
las dos hojas le chupa carmesíes.
(Góngora, Polifemo, vv. 329-32)

- 3) Estaba una fregona por Enero
metida hasta los muslos en el río,
lavando paños, con tal aire y brío,
que mil necios traía al retortero.
Un cierto conde, alegre y placentero,
le preguntó por gracia si hacía frío.
Respondió la fregona: “Señor mío,
Siempre llevo conmigo yo un brasero”.
El conde, que era astuto, y supo dónde,
le dijo, haciendo rueda como pavo,
que le encendiese un cirio que traía.
Y dijo entonces la fregona al conde,
alzándose las faldas hasta el rabo:
—“Pues sopla este tizón Vueseñoría”.
(PESO 60, attributed to Quevedo)

- 4) ¡Oh dulce noche! ¡Oh cama venturosa!
 Testigos del deleite y gloria mía,
 Decid qué os pareció de la porfía
 De aquella dama dulce y amorosa.
 ¡Cómo se me mostraba rigurosa!
 ¡Cómo de entre mis brazos se salía!
 ¡Cómo dos mil injurias me decía,
 la dulce mi enemiga tan graciosa!
 Pero cómo después me regalaba,
 Cogiéndome en sus brazos amorosos,
 Y abriendo aquellas piernas delicadas,
 ¡Con qué suavidad se meneaba!
 ¡Qué besos que me daba tan sabrosos!
 ¡Y qué palabras tan azucaradas!

(La poesía erótica de fray Melchor de la Serna 42)

These poems can be discussed in terms of their poetic tradition (popular or cultured), sources and influences (the Arabic erotic literary tradition or classical erotic poets such as Ovid and Catullus), language, metrics, structure, the particular nature of their eroticism, degree of explicitness, and, especially, tone. At this juncture, the handbooks that I mentioned before can be extremely practical and useful.

After these first sessions, and having read Alonso Hernández (1990) as an initial linguistic guide, my classes are devoted to close readings of both canonical and lesser-known poets. In terms of the course material, I generally organize seminars thematically, and we read groups of poems that fall into categories that can include the following, keeping in mind their relationships as conceptual devices:

- La poesía burlesco-erótica y la adoxografía erótica
- El retrato erótico
- La novela erótica en verso
- El cuerpo femenino erotizado
- Erotismo conventual: frailes y monjas
- Misticismo y erotismo
- El sueño erótico
- El mito erótico
- La burla erótica
- Elogios del falo

Appropriate secondary and critical readings are read concurrently. For example, we bring Alatorre and Maurer to bear when exploring the progression (in increasing explicitness) of erotic

dream sonnets from Petrarch's "La notte che seguì l'orribil caso" to Boscán's "Dulce soñar y dulce congojarme," Quevedo's "¡Ay, Floralba!" and the anonymous "Soñaba una doncella que dormía" (*PESO* 243). With these and subsequent poems, we discuss the use and differing aesthetic effect of euphemistic, sensual, direct, and sexually explicit terminology (*culo, coño, carajo*, etc.) as well as the transformation and occultation of erotic history through metaphors or allusions which were evident at the time but obscure today. In this regard, the most common semantic fields that enrich the erotic lexicon are set out in Alonso Hernández, together with an explanation of the process whereby euphemisms are created through polysemy, semantic homology, antithesis, and complementarity.

A timely and fruitful avenue of debate and research in terms of revealing poetry's multiple symbolic possibilities is the question of to what extent we can perform profane readings of sacred or mystical poetry. Jorge Guillén was the first to suggest the possibility of a "human" reading of San Juan de la Cruz in 1962: "Los poemas, si se los lee como poemas—y eso es lo que son—, no significan más que amor, embriaguez de amor, y sus términos se afirman sin cesar humanos. Ningún otro horizonte poético se percibe" (107). Luce López-Baralt, in *Aseidios a lo Indecible*, has also defended the legitimacy of exploring the human dimension of San Juan's "Noche oscura," whose erotic debt is certainly not to Neoplatonism but to the "Song of Songs." The critic praises this poem as "uno de los más bellos poemas de amor del Siglo de Oro," and she affirms that "sería penoso inhibirnos del goce artístico que esta lectura del texto, sin duda originalísimo, nos permite" (148).

In my experience this type of updated and provocative analysis of canonical poets and texts, combined with an introduction to poetry previously deemed unseemly or otherwise marginal, stimulates students to engage more deeply with the complex nature of Golden Age literature and the social and cultural spheres that defined the mentality that engendered such poems. At the same time it invigorates our field, opens up the literary universe and expands its history to include additional themes, a different denotative code, and a revision of the poetic canon. Among erotic poetry's functions and rewards are its aesthetic quality as a vehicle for expressing sensual love, its value as entertainment and amusement, its capacity to stretch the limits of the "literary," and its function as a means of suspending socially accepted values and transgressing established literary norms and codes. Linked with optimism and sensuality as well as a ludic perspective of existence, erotic poetry's role is to reflect human nature more authentically and illuminate the long-standing debate on the

supposed sobriety, chasteness and “morality” of Spanish literature. At the same time, it offers a wealth of research and dissertation opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students alike.

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