

SOUNDS AND SILENCES IN THE BAROQUE LABYRINTH: TEACHING GÓNGORA AND SOR JUANA

Emilie L. Bergmann
University of California, Berkeley

I . *Nuts and Bolts; Labyrinths and Threads*

What lured me irresistibly into studying sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish literature was an undergraduate professor's claim that what mattered in Golden Age literature was what was written between the lines. At the time, I imagined elusive meanings encoded by the author and decipherable through some canny detective work, as if part of the work were written in invisible ink and only required a candle flame or a certain chemical to reveal its secrets. What Elias L. Rivers's graduate seminars at Johns Hopkins revealed was a far richer and more elusive process of reading for multiple, often competing, meanings in baroque poetry. The experience of collaborative reading of poetry, a process that at times can be figured as unfolding and at other times navigating a labyrinth while holding several threads leading in different directions, has inspired my teaching.

Most students, however, cannot be expected to welcome the comparison of their coursework with losing their bearings in a labyrinth, no matter how seductive the concept was for me as an undergraduate. Undergraduate courses, particularly surveys, require clear signposts in the syllabus to enable students to make the most of their limited preparation time. I devote class time to focusing on specific poems and connections among poems, to help students learn to perceive networks of interwoven meanings in poetic language. Since undergraduates have become acquainted with Góngora's sonnet "Mientras por competir con tu cabello" and Sor Juana's "Este, que ves, engaño colorido" in the introduction to literary analysis that is a prerequisite for upper-division courses, I have greater freedom in choosing other sonnets to demonstrate approaches to these poets' work.

I ground the classroom discussion of poetry in the specific functions of meter, stanzaic forms, and figurative language in each poem. Reading the *silvas* of Góngora and Sor Juana against verse forms with repeated patterns of line length—sonnet, *canción*, *romance*, *décima*—provides ideal conditions for demonstrating the importance of meter and versification. The highly accessible language and simple diagrams of Dámaso Alonso's *Góngora y el "Polifemo"* opened the door to me as an undergraduate, allowing me to believe I could approach the monstrous difficulty of Góngora. Although its limits have become evident, I continue to use it as a resource for students reading the *Polifemo* for the first time, to acquaint them with rhetorical terms and the formal aspects of binaries in Góngora.

My students, however, are not satisfied with analyses of structural complexity or Renaissance poets' readings of classical texts. They want to know what all this has to do with the Spanish conquest of the Americas. I convey to my students the excitement of first reading John Beverley's "*Soledad Primera*, lines 1-61," as a graduate student wondering how to contextualize the formal networks of the Spanish Baroque in the history of empire, economic decline, social and political conflicts, and metropolitan and colonial courts.¹ Together with Betty Sasaki's 1995 *Caliope* article, "Góngora's Sea of Signs," Beverley's *Aspects of Góngora's "Soledades"* and the introductory essays in his edition of the *Soledades* are indispensable in locating Góngora's poetry in its distinct historical and geographical contexts.

Góngora and Sor Juana form a Baroque dyad; although I usually teach the two poets in separate seminars, the challenge is to teach their poetry as distinct and autonomous rather than teaching Góngora as preparation for Sor Juana's transformation of the Baroque, or Sor Juana's poetry merely as a transformative reading of Góngora. This comparative approach, however, is an aspect of my teaching of both in the context of the Baroque. Góngora's framing of the *Polifemo* and the *Soledades* in terms of the politics of patronage is obvious in the respective *dedicatorias*, but his poetic *persona* has not been conducive to biographical interpretations. In contrast, the biographical has been routinely foregrounded in discussions of Sor Juana, drawing upon the poet's self-fashioning. Fred Luciani has deconstructed the basis for this approach in his 1995 article, "Anecdotal Self-Invention" and more recently in his book, *Literary Self-Fashioning* (2004). In undergraduate courses, I assign readings from Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell's *The Answer / La respuesta*; in both undergraduate courses and seminars, I use Powell's translations because her choices of language highlight Sor Juana's multiple subjectivity (feminist, colonial and *criolla*). In order to present her writing in terms of feminine and colonial subjectivity in

graduate seminars, I assign the introduction and first chapter of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel's *Saberes americanos*. In undergraduate courses and seminars, I teach Sor Juana's sonnet 195, "El hijo que la esclava ha concebido," which appeared as the *dedicatoria* to the *Inundación castálida* (1689), as a devastatingly ironic commentary that extends beyond patronage to colonialism. *Romance* 51 "¿Cuándo, númenes divinos . . .?" clearly demonstrates the irony with which she negotiated her feminine and colonial subjectivity. To demonstrate how Sonnet 145, "Este, que ves, engaño colorido" mimics the masculine tradition of *carpe diem*, only to expose its fallacies, I use my article, "Dreaming in a Double Voice," and Nancy Vickers's article, "Diana Described." Georgina Sabat-Rivers's articles on the *retrato* in Sor Juana outline the classical and Hispanic tradition against which she writes. To introduce the visual aspects of the poem, I use William Clamurro's 1986 article. Luis Avilés analyzes the deictic rhetoric of the poem as an inversion of authority: the female speaker takes the role of teacher, casting her male interlocutor as student. The poem is conceptually complex, exposing the deceptive logic of the visual while employing a visual image whose clarity becomes blurred under scrutiny. Along with other critics, I have associated the poem with a mirror, and to illustrate this reading I use Velázquez's "Venus and Cupid," suggesting that the mirror in Sor Juana's poem is turned back on her addressee. More frequently, the poem is read as referring to a portrait of the speaker, identified as Sor Juana. Online images of portraits of Sor Juana are available at several websites, including those designed by Mariselle Meléndez (www.sip.uiuc.edu/Melendez/span442) and Geoffrey Kantaris (<http://www.latin-american.cam.ac.uk/SorJuana/SorJuana2.htm>). These portraits do not conform to the conventions of female beauty of the time. What is most striking about them is the presence of the letter in specific book titles surrounding Sor Juana.

The size of my literature classes allows me to abandon the lecture format. Instead, I initiate a structured discussion with questions on topics from the readings, but I plan for those inevitable occasions when students are not prepared. Fortunately, I found that students' estimation of my effectiveness as an instructor rose in direct proportion to my expectations of them in the classroom rather than displays of knowledge on my part. In other words, the harder the coursework, the better they like it—with the condition that assignments have clear guidelines and purpose. Since enrollment in my undergraduate courses is capped at 35 students and averages 20, I can assign brief oral presentations throughout the semester, beginning in the second week, when students have decided on courses. The presentations take five to seven minutes, with photocopied handouts prepared by students, and

often include critiques and commentaries on critical approaches. They spur discussion of material on the syllabus, and they produce a higher level of preparation and participation overall. Beginning a class session with this kind of presentation casts me in the role of interlocutor who can supply background information and resources.

In graduate seminars that include the *Polifemo*, *Soledades* or *Primero sueño*, I assign sections of the poem to pairs of students, who make presentations that aim for a 10-15 minute limit. While I attempt to refrain from interrupting with comments and clarifications, students welcome the informality of a focused dialogue. Dividing the *Polifemo* into sections and covering the poem in two seminar sessions is fairly easy, but dividing the *Soledad Primera* and *Primero sueño* is more challenging. Students are willing to spend three to five meetings on these poems, initially because they are on the M.A. list, but as we work with the text, they find that it ties together the relationship between poetry and scientific thought, Baroque and modernity, body and mind. I assign 20- to 40-line sections, attempting to match themes with students' interests. Since we begin reading these poems in the second third of the seminar, when students have already handed in short papers outlining their research projects, this level of planning pays off in helping students focus on their seminar papers.

Earlier in my career, I focused discussion on visual objects by using slides of Baroque architecture and paintings by Caravaggio, Ribera, Sánchez Cotán, and Velázquez, as well as Italian religious and mythological painting as a counterpart to the rich visual imagery and dramatic contrasts of the Baroque. Online resources provide access to a much wider range of images. In a recent seminar on Sor Juana, I was able to contextualize post-Tridentine attention to the distinction between idolatry and devotion to images with a contrasting religious esthetic, using online images of Pieter Jansz. Saenredam's architectural paintings of the whitewashed austerity of Dutch Reformed churches.² To accompany Sor Juana's "Hombres necios" and passages of the *Respuesta* regarding the perils of hiring male tutors to teach young girls, I provide a brief introduction to the career of Artemisia Gentileschi, and compare her paintings of Judith and Holofernes to those of other painters. These paintings also provide a visual background to the different relationships between violence and the erotic in Góngora and Sor Juana.

The online *Diccionario de Autoridades* makes it possible for me to demonstrate in class, rather than simply refer to, its usefulness in the process of understanding sixteenth and seventeenth-century poetic texts. It is the terms we take for granted whose seventeenth-century usages unlock meanings, and thus are the ones we need to look up. I

use homely anecdotes of my own embarrassing errors in interpretation as a graduate student as “teachable moments,” rather than students’ embarrassing misreadings. To demonstrate the usefulness of the dictionary, I discuss how *Autoridades*’ examples of the use of the term “cisura” were instrumental in developing my thesis linking Góngora’s metaphor of the *novia* as a rose in the *Soledad primera* to a specific visual image of defloration with violence and painting.

I often distribute photocopied pages with the multiple definitions and examples to unfold multiple and interwoven networks of meaning, since I still find it risky to use computer technology to structure a class—a glitch can transform a well-structured class session into a frustrating waste of class time. So far, I continue to photocopy and distribute diagrams, outlines, and study guides in class, and appreciate the flexibility of writing or drawing on the board, but, as with any apparently spontaneous performance, what I write or draw is most effective when I have sketched drafts and refined the diagrams on paper.

Teaching Sor Juana brings together my commitment to women’s studies and interests in literature and the visual arts. Sor Juana’s fascination with lenses, mirrors, and the mechanics and physiology of visual perception is woven throughout the *Sueño*, and draws upon her readings of Baroque science, particularly in the works of Athanasius Kircher. While the connection with the Baroque is obvious, I use Sor Juana’s references to astronomy as an important aspect of her colonial subjectivity. The opening lines of the *Sueño* situate the speaker in the darkness of a lunar eclipse, and posit night as an opportunity for exploring the cosmos. Although the metropolis may be lighted by the sun while the colony is shadowed, the stars can only be studied in the absence of sunlight. Darkness is, in the *Sueño*, a necessary condition for knowledge. Further, the telescope provides equal access to the stars regardless of where the viewer is located, or the viewer’s sex. Mirroring, another recurrent image in baroque culture and in Sor Juana’s poetry, is not merely an optical phenomenon; it has powerful gendered connotations. In my teaching, I draw upon the research that produced two articles and another forthcoming on questions of violence and the erotic in Góngora and Sor Juana, in connection with optics and visual perception.³ My articles are clearly indebted to Crystal Chemris’s work on Góngora and, in particular, the complex gendered representation of violence in the fisherman’s narrative of his daughters’ massacre of marine animals in the *Soledad segunda*. Góngora signals the eroticization of violence in the *dedicatoria* to the *Soledades* in the image of “el oso que aún besaba, atravesado, / la asta de tu luciente jabalina” (ll. 20-21). His version of the myth of Polyphemus and Galatea is structured on every

level by interrelationships of violence and eros. The subtitle of *Primero sueño* announces Sor Juana's imitation of Góngora, and it has been taken for granted by critics, but I asked in these articles how, precisely, does she address this aspect of his poetry? Robert ter Horst proposes that violence is displaced to a metatextual level in the form of Sor Juana's daring to compete with her predecessor and transgress gender boundaries. He views the poem as a "magnificent crime," "a conflictive undertaking that constructs itself on the basis of combat. . . an adversarial edifice" (247). I find, however, that in lines 730-57 of the *Sueño*, on the mystery of reproduction in flowers, the erotic is linked not to violence but a female genealogy of knowledge.

II. Silence, Speechlessness, Self-Censorship, and Sonorities

The pleasure of reading that kept me engaged with Renaissance and Baroque poetry, despite its difficulty, was in the sound of reading it aloud. From this experience, it becomes evident that meaning is not so much "written between the lines" as resounding between words, phrases, and phonemes. I encourage students to follow the paths suggested in listening to the language as they read aloud, as a first step in experiencing this poetry before attempting to find paraphrasable content, or even disentangle hyperbaton. They are understandably reluctant to take this risk both in or out of class, so online recitations that emphasize metrical patterns are particularly valuable. Recordings of musical interpretations assist in locating the highly literate poetry of Góngora within the oral tradition of the *romancero tradicional* and performance practices. Recitations of Góngora's poetry at the Brown University Góngora website (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Hispanic_Studies/gongora/indice.htm) give students a sense of the expressive sonorities of his verse, and recordings such as Ofelia Medina's "Mi Juana," available at the Cervantes Virtual website, dramatically display the metrical playfulness of Sor Juana's verse. One example is her spritely performance of the *esdrújulas* in Sor Juana's *romance decasilabo* 61 "Lámina sirva el cielo al retrato."

The poetics of silence, including the silence from which writing emerges, and the silences imposed by the repressive political environment in which both Góngora and Sor Juana wrote, have their incongruous counterpart in the conceptual and visual "noisiness" of Baroque texts, interlaced with references to other texts and other passages within the same text. As I teach these two quintessentially Baroque poets, I continue to develop distinct approaches: discerning in the unmapped spaces of signification between the elements of Góngora's dichotomies a crisis of language and signification, while

foregrounding Sor Juana's explicit references in the *Respuesta* to what cannot be said and the suggestive imagery of the underground stream in the *Sueño*.

Góngora creates a counter-rhythm to the overall impression of flow created by the use of the *silvas*, through repeated references to interruptions of speech and natural sounds as well as to silence in *Soledad primera*. The richly visual scenes of the procession of wedding-bound villagers along the stream in *Soledad Primera* are focalized through the nearly-silent figure of the *peregrino*. The bark of a watchdog in the silence of the night is an auditory correlative to the solitary signal of the fire that guides him through the darkness in lines 84-89. In the light of day, the *peregrino* watches village maidens from the hollow of a tree, but he also overhears: "mantenía / la vista de hermosura, y el oído / de métrica armonía" (ll. 268-70). Musical and natural sounds are interwoven throughout the passage that follows, alternating voices ("coros tejiendo, voces alternando," l. 540), with courtly musical instruments ("las lucientes de marfil clavijos" and the "duras cuerdas de las negras guijas," ll. 345-47) with the "estruendo" of rustic songs and instruments, and the wild and tamed sounds of water and wind: the *arroyo*, for example, is described as, "de quejarse ronco, / mudo sus ondas, cuando no enfrenado," (ll. 241-42), or "el ya sañado arroyo, ahora manso . . . en cuanto a su furor perdonó el viento" (ll. 343-49).

The *arroyo's* music is imagined in terms of courtly instruments in counterpoint with the voices of the youths; the "canoro instrumento" of one *serrana* (l. 239); castanets played by another (ll. 251-52); and raucous reed instruments ("albogues," l. 289), an appropriately pastoral version of the cyclops's monstrous pan-pipes in the *Polifemo*. The alternation of the current of the stream between "sañaudo" and "manso" can be read as a musical accompaniment to the pattern of genesis and apotheosis that John Beverley traces on multiple levels, from specific metaphors to the overall structure of the *Soledades*.⁴ Language itself becomes script in the deleted lines that describe the course of the river in rhetorical terms, and lines 602-11, which brilliantly transform the moving procession into other moving shapes: the flight of birds through the air and a flotilla of ships on the sea, finally inscribing them on paper and tracing the origins of the alphabet. These passages open numerous possibilities for Derridean discussions of orality and writing.

Speech embedded in the narrative of the *Soledad primera* takes the form of speech acts: the *peregrino's* brief plea (ll. 62-64), the pastoral praise of the "Bienaventurado albergue" (ll. 94-135), the *cabrero's* lament (ll. 212-21), the *politico serrano's* warning against maritime imperialism (ll. 366-530), the *epitalamio* (ll. 767-844), and the blessing, "Vivid felices" (ll. 893-943). What is most distinctive about speech directly addressing

the *peregrino* is its interruption: the *cabrero's* reminiscence upon the ruins of a castle is interrupted by the “venatorio estruendo” of the hunting party, and the *político serrano's* tears interrupt his critique of exploration and empire.

To foreground the conceptual links between *selva* and *silva* in Góngora, I assign readings from the introductory essays in John Beverley's edition of the *Soledades* and Maurice Molho's *Semántica y poética*. I take a more risky approach to the *silvas* of the *Sueño*: I ask students to imagine a musical accompaniment to the opening lines of the poem. If they have some acquaintance with the music of the period, they will find that the rhythms of virtually all classical music are too rigid for the variation between heptasyllabic and endecasyllabic lines. So far, the best matches I have found in classical music are the preludes to Bach's unaccompanied cello suite #2 in D minor for cello, and the slow movements of his unaccompanied violin sonatas and partitas. I continue to search for the ideal jazz accompaniment; meanwhile Marcela Rodríguez's *Funesta* (1996), a series of six arias based on Sor Juana's poetry that conjures the Baroque, has become available online.

In Sor Juana's poetry, explicit silences can be witty: they stand in for the parts of the body that cannot be named, for example, in the *romance decasílabo* 61 “Lámina sirva el cielo.” The verbosity of this kind of silence is most obvious in the “Ovillejos” 214: their claim of failure to create a verbal portrait of “Lisarda” is belied by the highly detailed and intertextual trace of the poet's attempt, which amounts to a verbal portrait of the artist herself as she struggles with a canvas that is anything but blank.

With its aura of mystery, the enigma of Sor Juana's final silence draws students and frames her *oeuvre*, providing a convenient biographical point of departure for writers seeking to recreate her. Sor Juana, aware of the power of silence, evokes it in the *Respuesta*, claiming inability to respond to “Sor Filotea's” letter, alluding to the silences of church fathers and working the interrelationships of speaking and silence, professed ignorance and knowledge, explained in Josefina Ludmer's “Tretas del débil.” Silence, however, takes on a life of its own, and the dazzling spectacle of her descent, which she herself appears to have anticipated in her use of the image of Phaëton and the immolation and rebirth of the mythical phoenix, can obstruct the view of her flight.

The challenge in teaching is to shift from attempting to fill the silence with speculation that positions her as victim of powerful male authorities, both religious and secular, to elaborating gendered approaches to the Baroque richness of her poetic texts. What is most telling in the narrative of Sor Juana's life in recent films, novels, and

operas is that, although her gifts were intellectual, her downfall is imagined in terms not only of gender but of sexual transgression. Some notable exceptions are Electa Arenal's play *This Life Within me Won't Keep Still*, Paul Anderson's *Hunger's Brides*, and Marcela Rodríguez's *Funesta*. I have critiqued Octavio Paz's insistence that she could not have been a lesbian,⁵ and yet the assumption that the authorities' censure was prompted by her lesbianism has led to another kind of gender trap, in which intellectual power in a woman is equated with inevitable doom: feminine desire, rather than anatomy, becomes destiny. This narrative continues to have all the seductive power of the destruction of a daring and beautiful woman, precisely the operatic plot to which Catherine Clément refers when she notes in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* that "The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die" (5). Whatever "ruido" Sor Juana may have had with church authorities, I perennially remind my students, her death was not the work of the Santo Oficio, at least not directly. And yet, the internet site for Carla Lucero's opera-in-progress, "The Sor Juana Project," describes the work as "a lyrical and tragic opera on the destruction of a (lesbian) genius at the hands of the Spanish inquisition." Her biography has inspired at least two other operas, including Lucero's project, inspired by Alicia Gaspar de Alba's novel *Sor Juana's Second Dream*, as well as several novels and plays.

I think often of the anguished protest of a student at one of the multitude of tercentenary conferences between 1992 and 1995. After hearing scholarly discussions of the historical circumstances of Sor Juana's writing, analyses of the classical and Biblical references in her theater, and the probable extent of her knowledge of Nahuatl and the sciences, among other topics, the student intervened: "You're taking away *my* Sor Juana!" I had thought that Sor Juana did not belong to anyone. And yet, she is an increasingly visible iconic figure for Chican@/Latin@ students, and it is worthwhile to ask what she means to those students who already feel that she belongs to them. The idea of "*my* Sor Juana" illuminated Mexican actress Ofelia Medina's memorable performance with music, dancing, masks, and puppets in the former chapel of the Claustro de Sor Juana at a 1991 conference in Mexico.⁶ Medina, who also played another Mexican cultural icon, Frida Kahlo, in the film "*Frida, naturaleza viva*" (1986), celebrated another side of the Baroque, the liveliness and ironic wit of Sor Juana's poetry.

The current iconic status of Sor Juana is, after all, of great advantage in teaching her work, inspiring avid interest among students and producing a wealth of critical approaches. My presentation not only of her work, but also Góngora's, in the classroom involves multiple subject positions: as a feminist committed to placing gender at the

center of my teaching; as a scholar committed to questioning assumptions and providing students with resources to explore texts and context; and, not least among these perspectives, as a reader of poetry whose greatest enjoyment is the lively dialogue of exchanging views of poetic texts in a seminar. Bringing these subject positions together in collaboration enriches that process.

Notes

¹*Aspects* did not appear until 1980, but Beverley's earlier *MLN* article, "Soledad Primera, ll. 1-61," transformed the reading and teaching of Góngora.

²One easily accessible resource is <http://www.artcyclopedia.com>.

³I am in the process of editing a collection of essays on Sor Juana in the MLA series "Approaches to Teaching World Literature"; I refer readers to the illuminating essays in this forthcoming volume for more detailed discussions of the baroque, colonial consciousness, the visual arts, and music in Sor Juana.

⁴See also Yael Halevi, "The Rhythm of Góngora's *Soledades*: an Approach for Reading and Teaching."

⁵See "Abjection and Ambiguity," in which I compare Paz's discomfort with a lesbian origin for Latin American poetry with the reinvention of Sappho by generations of European lyric poets, discussed in Joan de Jean's *Fictions of Sappho*.

⁶A recording made in 1995 by UNAM of her performance, *Mi Juana*, is now available at the Cervantes Virtual website: <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/FichaObra.html?Ref=13752>.

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