

THE RHETORIC OF FEMALE FRIENDSHIP IN THE LYRIC OF SOR VIOLANTE DEL CIELO

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The question of female friendships is particularly elusive; we know so little or perhaps have forgotten so much (Smith-Rosenberg 3).

Friendship has always been a crucial and ubiquitous part of the social fabric, and its importance is felt by many sociologists and social historians to equal that of kinship relations. Maurice Aymard notes that in the Renaissance, the period to which I travel for “friendly” arguments, “The mere fact that friendships were not recorded in letters or intimate diaries does not make them any less real. Friendship combined with blood relations to create a network of horizontal and vertical ties around every individual, a mesh of symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships, some tranquil, others full of conflict” (449). Friendships could be social or more personal, utilitarian (such as those communities of interest at the Versailles court depicted by Saint-Simon in his *Memoires*), or deeply intimate. Characterized as existing outside the family, friendship was often found in institutions that replaced the family on a temporary or permanent basis: the school, youth cohorts, the army (Aymard 458). To this list we should add, of course, the monastery and the convent.

Notwithstanding the above, however, in her theoretical volume on the topic Pat O'Connor points out that women's friendship is both vastly underexplored within a variety of disciplines as well as underportrayed in literature.¹ Indeed, in Golden Age Spanish literature female friendship is practically non-existent, as explicit topic or implicit thematics. Cervantes, for example, has given us several fascinating male pairings such as Lotario and Anselmo, Rinconete and Cortadillo, and even the loquacious canine companions Cipión and Berganza. Yet while the theme of “los dos amigos” is commonplace, their female peers are few, if any. The *comedia* does show women as active social subjects, but the intimacy of friendship is, at best, revealed fleetingly and often negatively. Even in women-authored texts female friendships are underrepresented. Thus Alberta Contarello and Chiara Volpato have remarked upon the lack of images of female friendships in women-authored literature from the twelfth through the nineteenth centuries, and hypothesize that “If friendship is only possible between free individuals, this underrepresentation may be proof of the slow emergence

of women as subjects deciding for themselves and running their own lives" (72). The authors conclude that "whereas rich and detailed descriptions of friendships between males are frequently encountered, female friendships are underportrayed and in their slow emergence seem still to be searching for their own words" (72).

Notwithstanding the underrepresentation that Contarello and Volpato accurately note, at least one Iberian female lyric poet seems to have found her own words with which to communicate both the nature and the passion of female friendship. Consequently, this essay is an initial incursion into the discursive world of literary female friendship and its particular rhetoric, as expressed by the sixteenth-century Portuguese nun, Sor Violante del Cielo. Before discussing Sor Violante's work, however, let me pursue further the critical tradition regarding female friendship.

Several critics have noted a widespread tendency either to ignore or to trivialize women's friendships throughout the disciplines. Linda Woodbridge, for example, analyzes the strategies for trivializing female friendship (thereby revealing a need to diminish its power) found in English Renaissance literature (224-43). There female friendships are linked to kinship and family responsibility rather than to free and rational choice. Instead of being friendships between social equals, female relationships such as mistress/servant are based upon social dependency. Such female associations are, of course, particularly prevalent in Golden Age drama, where *dama/criada* friendships are commonplace. Woodbridge further observes that while male friendships are forged in a world of war and statesmanship, female friendships pertain to the less lofty, less noble world of courtship and social trivia. She concludes that "the 'separate spheres' approach to male and female endeavor inevitably cheapened female friendship" (241). O'Connor notes the lack of interest in female friendship even in women's studies. In this regard Robert Brain has further noted the absence of mythic endorsement of female friendships, remarking on the lack of devoted women friends comparable to Achilles and Patroclus (47). This is acutely true in Golden Age lyric poetry, where allusions to mythic male friends such as Pylades and Orestes appear frequently, but without female counterparts.

The only friendship that could perhaps serve as exemplar for women in such a mythic way is the biblical story of Ruth (the name itself sounds like the Hebrew for "friendship") and her mother-in-law Naomi. Even though the two women's friendship is not unmarked by a male presence (or absence)—Mahlot, Ruth's dead husband—Ruth's classic expression of female solidarity, loyalty, and love is one of the most memorable in the Old Testament:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I

will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:11)

Throughout literary history women have frequently been portrayed as incapable of friendship and inevitably hostile to other women due to the pressures of sexual jealousy and competition for men. Such portrayals are by no means limited to male-authored texts. For example, this stereotype is exemplified by Fenisa in María de Zayas' *La traición en la amistad* (ca. 1628-1632), who betrays the female community by shamelessly pursuing all the available males, saying at the beginning of the play:

¿Soy amiga? Sí. Pues, ¿cómo
 pretendo contra mi amiga
 tan alevosa traición?
 ¡Amor, de en medio te quita! (. . .)
 El amor y la amistad
 furiosos golpes se tiran;
 cayó el amistad en tierra
 y amor victoria apellida;
 téngala yo, ciego dios,
 en tan dudosa conquista. (279)

Several decades before Zayas, in an essay written between 1572 and 1580, Montaigne categorically affirms the following regarding women's supposed incapacity for friendship:

the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for that communion and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond; nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot [. . .] this sex in no instance has yet succeeded in attaining it, and by the common agreement of the ancient schools is excluded from it. (138)

Although Montaigne neglects to elaborate on the teachings of these schools, classical philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, and subsequent essayists like Bacon (whose sources were the former), either explicitly or implicitly exclude female friendship from their discussions. In other words, a woman's very nature was thought to render her incapable of the nobility of "true" friendship. Even in our own times, Simone de Beauvoir has claimed that women's fellow feeling rarely rises to genuine friendship since they see in every other an enemy (606-07).

Be that as it may, a persuasive counterpoint to Montaigne's assertion and to commonly held opinion was made by the seventeenth-century English poet Katherine Philips in a series of poems she wrote on the theme of friendship.² Many of her compositions are addressed to her close friend Mrs. Anne Owens, the *Lucasia* of her poetry. In one of these, entitled "A

Friend" and published in the 1669 edition of her *Poems*, Philips vindicates women's claims to friendship based on the inherent equality of the male and female soul:

If Souls no Sexes have, for Man t' exclude
 Women from Friendship's vast capacity,
 Is a Design injurious or rude,
 Onely maintain'd by partial tyranny.
 Love is allow'd to us and Innocence,
 And noblest Friendships do proceed from thence. (95)

Thus Philips argues that not only are women capable of the most exalted friendship engendered by love, but that to claim otherwise is a deliberate act of exclusion perpetrated by men.

About twenty years earlier than the English poet, Sor Violante del Cielo, the subject of this essay, could also be considered to implicitly refute Montaigne's sentiments in a singularly unique sonnet written precisely on the theme of friendship:

Belisa, el amistad es un tesoro
 tan digno de estimarse eternamente
 que a su valor no es paga suficiente
 de Arabia y Potosí la plata y oro.
 Es la amistad un lícito decoro
 que se guarda en lo ausente y lo presente,
 y con que de un amigo el otro siente
 la tristeza, el pesar, la risa, el lloro.
 No se llama amistad la que es violenta,
 sino la que es conforme simpatía,
 de quien lealtad hasta la muerte ostenta.
 Esta la amistad es que hallar quería,
 ésta la que entre amigas se sustenta,
 y ésta, Belisa, en fin, la amistad mía. (271)

First published in her 1646 *Rimas varias*, the sonnet is reprinted in Julián Olivares's and Elizabeth Boyce's anthology *Tras el espejo la musa escribe* (1993). In the introduction to their collection, Olivares and Boyce point out that this poem "llama la atención por el contraste que representa con los poemas escritos por los hombres a sus compañeros y amigos" (87). They speak of the fundamentally philosophical nature of poems such as Fray Luis de León's odes to Salinas and Felipe Ruiz, and Aldana's epistle to Arias Montano. In these compositions friendship is either contextualized and subsumed within a mutually shared philosophy, or expressed as an inspiration for Neoplatonic musings. Thus the importance of Sor Violante's sonnet is twofold: as a revisionist part of literary history (since it portrays and extolls female friendship while that topic is generally disavowed in

Golden Age literature), and, as I will discuss subsequently, as a guidepost for research into female intimacy in the early modern period.

The lyric precursors for Sor Violante's sonnet on friendship by Fray Luis and Aldana are accompanied in the Spanish Renaissance by several Horatian epistles that touch upon the theme of male friendship. Among these are Garcilaso's informal one to Boscán ("Señor Boscán, quien tanto gusto tiene") and the longer more formal philosophical epistles exchanged between Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and Boscán (the former's "El no maravillarse hombre de nada" and the latter's "Holgué, Señor, con vuestra carta tanto"). In all of these compositions friendship is a tangential theme, one among others upon which the poets philosophize. For example, Garcilaso begins his epistle to Boscán by writing that the friendship they share permits him to use an informal style: "Entre muy grandes bienes que consigo / el amistad perfeta nos concede / es aqueste descuido suelto y puro, / lejos de la curiosa pesadumbre" (116).

Different from what we read in Sor Violante, however, none of these male-authored poems is *primarily* a philosophical meditation upon the nature of friendship, nor exclusively an expression of love or friendship between poet and addressee. Although they contain related subthemes, friendship is more often a facilitator of rhetorical display in this masculine verse. For example, Garcilaso limits his remarks on friendship to the more impersonal moral section (which all Horatian epistles contain) of his poem to Boscán. Sor Violante's poem, on the contrary, is both *about* friendship and a paean to it. Friendship is the poem's inspiration, its theme, and its offering. Just as the poetic voice offers the friendship so elegantly inscribed in the poem, the poem itself acts as an emblem and token of female companionship.

The nun's sonnet reveals a different rhetoric, one which I denominate the rhetoric of female friendship. It is written in an extremely direct, prose-like style, unencumbered by the Baroque tropes and conceits that adorn much of her lyric and were typical for her historical period. The initial apostrophe "Belisa" calls attention to the fact that, rather than an impersonal disquisition on the nature of friendship, it is directed to a specific recipient. This certainly complicates the poem's ultimate meaning further. Olivares and Boyce identify the likely addressee as Bernarda Ferreira de Lacerda, to whom Sor Violante later dedicated a funeral sonnet. What follows in the poem is a meditation upon and register of the parameters of what true friendship is, or should be: a treasure whose value far exceeds the mythical gold and silver of Orient and Occident, of Araby and Potosí. Of course, with the mention of Potosí readers are placed, at the same time, within a mythical and historical Spanish context. Further on the sonnet posits friendship as a licit decorum that is maintained in presence and in absence of the friend, and, very importantly, is nurtured by the equal sharing of emotions. Here, perhaps, is where Sor Violante's rhetoric and liter-

ary image of friendship differs most from masculine ones in which male bonding through confessional sharing is rare, if not absent, during this period. In this regard the supposedly different natures of male and female friendship, with the consequent disparagement of the latter, are stipulated by Bourne in his 1912 essay "The Excitement of Friendship":

The fatal facility of women's friendships, their copious outpourings of grief to each other, their sharing of wounds and sufferings, their half-pleased interest in misfortune—all this seems of a lesser order than the robust friendship of men, who console each other in a much more subtle, even intuitive way . . . (Enright and Rawlinson 123-24)

Bourne's disparaging mutation of female friends's intimate sharing into "copious outpourings of grief" and "half-pleased interest in misfortune" presents such intimacy as a marker of women's fundamental weakness and morbid sentimentality, as opposed to the "robust" paucity of intimate expression between males.³

In her poem Sor Violante explains that friendship cannot be forced, but must be based on mutual affinity and affection, a Platonic notion of like-to-like the philosopher expounds upon in the *Lysis* dialogue. In addition, friendship occurs among those (like the biblical Ruth) committed to remaining loyal to their friend until death. In the sonnet's concluding tercet Violante admits, however implicitly, that this is the type of friendship that *should* exist between female friends, the kind of relationship that she is seeking and the one she is willing to provide. The final verse ends the poem as a simple yet profound offering presented with open hands to "Belisa." If the poetic voice emphasizes that this is the friendship she wanted to find ("Esta la amistad es que hallar quería"), there must have been something about it that made it so special and conclusive.

Olivares and Boyce analyze the type of relationship described in this poem as that of two friends sharing their lives, experiences and emotions and feeling mutual compassion. They observe that, "En esta concepción de la amistad, las amigas se miran la una a la otra, mientras que en los poemas de fray Luis y de Aldana, los amigos conjuntamente contemplan el cosmos" (1993: 87).⁴ But do the two women, in fact, face each other within this profoundly personal relationship? As the poetic voice says at the end, "Esta la amistad es que hallar quería, / ésta la que entre amigas se sustenta, / y ésta, Belisa, en fin, la amistad mía." "Hallar quería," she says, not *he hallado*, *tenemos* or the like; and "Mía," not *nuestra*. These pronominal positionings, as slight as they may be, allow us to view the poem more as an affirmation and example of what true female friendship ought to be, rather than proof of a mutually shared love. The poem exudes an ontological longing which, perhaps, has not been met by the recipient of the poem, whoever she may really be.

When comparing this particular poem to those of Katherine Philips, and I make the comparison because Philips seems to have written more on the theme than any other European woman poet of the period, Violante's sonnet reveals a notable lack of sensual imagery. It is worth noting in this regard that the Englishwoman's works have been included in recent volumes of homosexual poetry, for example the *Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983). And in her article on lesbianism and female friendship in English women's verse, Mary Libertin explains how criticism of Philips' and other poets' work has been affected by psychosocial and psychosexual prejudice. Naturally, there is a parallelism between this conditioning and Sor Violante's contextualization.

That particular constraint on Sor Violante's reception is abetted by the fact that most theorists or philosophers of friendship draw a clear distinction between love and friendship, the latter supposedly lacking the intensity and desire of the former. As Montaigne says, love's ardor "is more active, more scorching, and more intense," whereas friendship "is a constant and settled warmth, all gentleness and smoothness, with nothing bitter and stinging about it" (137). Even Philips in the poem I cited above differentiates friendship from love as follows:

Friendship's an Abstract of this noble Flame,
 'Tis Love refined and purged from all its dross,
 The next to Angels Love, if not the same,
 As strong as passion is, though not so gross . . . (94)

Indeed, Sor Violante's sonnet to Belisa, at least on the surface, is not about passionate love, but rather about sympathy (which Philips calls "the chiefest thing in Friends" [95]), decorum, and loyalty. Nonetheless, the type of friendship she seeks closely approximates what have been called "romantic friendships" by scholars of English and American literature. Lillian Faderman has argued that these intense friendships between women were expressed not only with verbal passion, but with kisses and caresses. She clarifies that

Their language and behavior are incredible today. Thus such friendships are usually diminished, by attributing them to the facile sentimentality of other centuries, or by explaining them in neat terms such as 'lesbian' meaning sexual proclivity. We have learned to deny such a depth of feeling toward anyone but a prospective or an actual mate. Other societies did not demand this kind of suppression. What these women felt, they were able to say; and what they said, they were able to demonstrate. (84)

Faderman states that in the nineteenth century these romantic friendships were "love relationships in every sense except perhaps the genital" in which

friends opened their souls to each other and spoke a language that was in no way different from that of heterosexual love: "They pledged to remain 'faithful' forever, to be in 'each other's thoughts constantly,' to live together and even to die together" (16).

It would seem that in the early modern period also women were less inhibited about expressing affection for other women physically or verbally, and certainly less obsessed than their twentieth-century counterparts with the spectre of what nowadays we would call lesbianism.⁵ The dichotomy of the message contained in the poetry that reflects such relationships is exemplified in one of Sor Violante's love poems, a series of four that the nun wrote to another woman or women. In this *romance*, also included in the Olivares and Boyce anthology, the female poetic voice expresses the intensity of her devotion to her beloved, "Menandra." It begins:

Si vivo en ti transformada,
Menandra, bien lo averigüas;
pues cuando me tiras flechas,
hallas en ti las heridas. (1993: 295)

The poem is composed around the central image of the beloved's hand, which bleeds when she, who holds the lyric voice's soul in her palm, disdains her. While Aristotle defined friendship as one soul in two bodies, here the image is of fusion ("vivo en ti transformada") and possession of body and soul by the beloved. The poem's highly sensual tone, achieved through the repetition of blood imagery, borders on the mystical with its echo of San Juan's verse "amada en el Amado transformada" from his "Noche oscura." In addition, and given the fact that Violante is a nun, a relationship akin to transubstantiation is within the range of the desire expressed.

Olivares and Boyce have studied Violante's four love poems in a 1995 article, and rightly feel that it would be anachronistic to limit an interpretation of them to an expression of lesbian love (196). Nevertheless, as they say, such a possibility cannot be totally discarded. They see the poet as co-opting "masculine amorous discourse in order to create a lyric of seduction in which the desiring subject is a woman who declares her love to a desired object, also a woman" (196). Thus for them Sor Violante is appropriating discourse in order to reconceptualize love between women as an act of liberation from masculine literary authority (196).

Olivares and Boyce correctly conclude that in these poems Sor Violante, like Sappho,

conceives poetic creation as a literature written by women for women.

And in this poetic world, man is cast to the periphery, if not relegated to the role of intruder. Above all, the female speaker in this poetry appropriates a male prerogative. She becomes the desiring subject; and, because the object of desire is also a woman, the speaker controls the gaze that objectifies the desired beloved, thereby establishing a new perspective and creating a new geometry of desire. (196)

However, would not one be precariously close to sustaining a critical paradigm if one approaches this poetry, solely from the perspective of how it relates to the male, be it the poet, the desiring subject, or masculine poetry? Is there another way? Can this poetry be scrutinized, in fact, as an expression of what twentieth-century critics and general public would call a female sensibility? Even if the types of expressions of feminine affection that we find in Sor Violante's and, for that matter, Katherine Philips' poems are conventional, can they be given a more literal reading? In other words, can the rhetoric of female friendship and love represent, rather than (or as well as) a conscious co-optation of masculine discourse, an expression of the continuum of female sentiment and sexuality in the Renaissance? Let us remind ourselves that recent views on human sexuality question homo/heterosexual binarism and see it not as dividing up into two (or three) neat and mutually exclusive categories—hetero-, homo-, and bisexual—but instead as a continuum extending along the three. At the same time, O'Connor has pointed out that "Friendship is (. . .) both a personal attachment and a socially constructed and culturally articulated form of relationship" (27). Therefore, if this rhetoric of friendship does reflect such a sexual continuum, what would be the sociohistorical, psychosocial and psychosexual context or contexts that would explain it?

If we return to the notion of romantic friendships as defined by Faderman, it is productive to remember that similar relationships flourished in Golden Age Spain in the numerous female monastic communities. The intimate companionships formed in the convent have been classified as sisterhood, and as spiritual, special or particular friendships. Janice Raymond provides a compelling discussion of spiritual and particular friendships in monasticism, pointing out that:

The companionship that developed in religious communities of women was based on spiritual friendship. This constitutes a unique genre in the history of ideas about friendship and must be examined as such. Spiritual friendship has a language and style of its own within which a deep Gyn/affection was embodied. Nuns expressed commitment to each other in a mode of communication that is peculiar to spiritual friendship, along with a highly pietistic tone that is typical of this 'companionship of souls.' (86)

Sor Violante's poem to "Menandra" is very much reflective of the peculiar mode of communication delineated by Raymond.

In monastic life, where women and men were physically as well as emotionally segregated, emotional fulfillment through female friendships was facilitated and *de facto* enhanced.⁶ Although I am certainly not suggesting that female-female relations occur only when men are unavailable, it is true that the intimacy of communal life combined with a lack of interaction with the outside (masculine and feminine) world after Trent did favor the development of intense homosocial ties *intramuros*. Because it was felt that such intimate friendships could supplant devotion to God, a “canonical” nun in a position of authority like Teresa of Avila was perfectly aware of the perceived dangers of such “particular friendships.” In fact, she warns her nuns repeatedly against forming such attachments.

For example, in chapter six of *Camino de perfección* (finished 1564) Saint Teresa describes “qué es amor del prójimo y lo que dañan amistades particulares” (*Obras completas* 208). The concerns she expresses have to do with the risk to communal life posed by the jealousies and factionalism that can result from particular friendships. Thus Alison Weber has analyzed Saint Teresa’s warnings against particular friendships as examples of a “rhetoric of solidarity.” (84-85) Teresa cautions that “de aquí vienen el no amar tanto a todas, el sentir el agravio que se hace a aquélla, el desear tener para regalarla, el buscar tiempo para hablarla, y muchas veces más para decirle lo que la quiere que lo que ama a Dios” (209). To avoid the “ponzoña” that such passionate friendships usually spread, she recommends that each sister love the other sisters equally, but none in particular, and provides pragmatic measures such as silence and solitude to avoid such friendships: “Para remedio de esto es gran cosa no estar juntas ni hablarse sino las horas señaladas, conforme a la costumbre que ahora llevamos—que es no estar todas juntas—y a nuestra Constitución, que manda estar cada religioso apartado en su celda” (210). In chapter six of the *Constituciones*, also written in the mid-1560s, Saint Teresa repeats her admonitions with respect to communal monastic life, this time with greater specificity:

Ninguna hermana abrace a otra, ni la toque el rostro ni en las manos, ni tengan amistades en particular, sino todas se amen en general, como lo mandó Cristo a sus Apóstoles muchas veces; pues siendo tan pocas, fácil será de hacer. Procuren de imitar a su Esposo, que dio la vida por nosotros; este amarse unas a otras en general y no en particular importa mucho. (*Obras completas* 642)

Thus Saint Teresa’s repeated warnings regarding temptations that could supplant the nuns’ love of God reveal her disquiet with respect to the emotional and physical entanglements created by “special friendships.”

Serrano y Sanz supposed that Sor Violante had little religious vocation and continued to receive visitors and study while in the convent.⁷ This

might explain, at least in part, why the Portuguese nun seemed not to heed this type of proscription, which was still in effect during her time. For instance, the Jesuit moralist Bernardino de Villegas is much more explicit (and fearful) than Saint Teresa with respect to female intimacy in his 1635 treatise *La esposa de Cristo instruida con la vida de Santa Lutgarda, virgen, monja de San Bernardo*. In it he claims that the "amistades particulares son la peste de las comunidades religiosas" (Vigil 249). His book provided both an example for the good nun to follow as well as a warning of the emotional dangers—and those of the flesh—lurking in the convent: "dentro de su misma casa hallará, si no se cautela, quien la enlace en los lazos de su propia carne; importuno enemigo que con tanta demasía nos busca, y aún a veces nos halla" (248). Villegas subsequently develops a seven-point method for determining the nature of the love nuns profess for each other. The moralist's concerns notwithstanding, it is impossible to know to what extent such particular "amistades" were intense emotional, spiritual attachments; whether they were physically intimate and demonstrative like those described by Faderman; or genital, i.e. lesbian. In this regard Rosanna Fiocchetto's study of what she calls the "scientific destruction" of lesbians traces attitudes towards lesbianism since antiquity through the nineteenth century. The author notes with regard to lesbianism in the convent that

A finales del siglo XVII cuando un diez por ciento de la población femenina vivía en los conventos en estrecho contacto y alejadas de los hombres, la entidad del 'crimen' debía ser tal como para empujar al sacerdote italiano Ludovico María Sinistrari a escribir un tratado sobre la 'sodomia faeminarum' en el que distinguía entre la penetración con los dedos y la que se producía mediante algún instrumento. (19)

Residing in convents, nuns were free from reproductive responsibilities and thus also free from what both Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig have called "compulsory heterosexuality."⁸ Rich contends that fundamental attachments exist between women which are diluted by the institution of heterosexuality. Although often marred by presentism and heterophobia, Rich's arguments in favor of a "lesbian continuum," a broadening of the category of "lesbian" to include all forms of primary intensity between women (thus becoming the essence of female friendship), can help us to understand erotic same-sex lyric produced by poets such as Violante del Cielo.⁹

Enclosed within a receptive and possibly cultured female community,¹⁰ the cloistered sisters were uniquely positioned to develop a women's poetry which would express what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called that continuum or spectrum of affect gradations of which sexual and emotional impulses are a part (29). The two poems that I have discussed can be located along that continuum of female friendship and love.

Whether or not overt sexual expression was a part of female friendships in the Golden Age, their intensity, passion and seriousness should not be discounted. Nor should their literary expression be necessarily categorized either as conventional literary exercises or censured as expressing deviant impulses, as they have been in the past. Female friendships such as those we find in the poetry of Sor Violante del Cielo and, it is to be hoped, in other works yet to be discovered, are still uncharted territory. Such friendships pertain to a world whose intimacies were largely inaccessible to men, and thus absent from history (literary and otherwise). A line of interpretation that explores the complexities of textual friendship, without uncoupling it from its sentimental and sensual possibilities, will perhaps change, or at least expand, our views on the type of intimate language we find in Sor Violante's female *De amicitia*. O'Connor has said that friendship is a personal relationship, but that its importance transcends the purely personal (193). This is why Sor Violante's sonnet to Belisa and *romance* to Menandra ultimately transcend aesthetic and biographic considerations. The rhetoric of female friendship they represent reveals the polysemous intricacies, the significance and the centrality of female intimacy in the Golden Age. At the same time that rhetoric expresses what the ancient philosophers described as the happiest and most human of all forms of love.

Notes

¹She notes that although the previous fifteen years (1977-1992) had seen a growing interest in female friendship in such fields as sociology, social psychology and the science of personal relationships and feminism, not a great deal is known about friendships between women (173). Her volume is an attempt to begin to identify the elements that might be included in a theoretical understanding of friendship.

²I am indebted to my colleague, Winfried Schleiner, for bringing the work of Katherine Philips to my attention.

³This is precisely an example of the styles of gender-specific expression analyzed in such modern tracts as the linguist Deborah Tannen's *Gender and Discourse* (1994).

⁴O'Connor reviews the vast literature that studies the differences between male and female same-sex friendships, noting that while mutual helpfulness is most central to female friendships, shared activities and similar interests are most central to males. She posits further that females use more non-verbal expressions of affection, and that the essential difference between male and female friendships is that the latter are "face to face" whereas the former are "side by side" (29).

⁵O'Connor points out in this regard that "the emergence of the social con-

struction of lesbianism, and the continued stigmatization of that identity, has inhibited the development and maintenance of friendships between women. It has effectively excluded intimate physical contact from the ambit of normal friendships" (34).

⁶Numerous scholars have discussed the female monastic subculture as one which fostered women's intellectual and emotional life as well as providing a sphere of political and spiritual power. See fuller discussions in Eckenstein (1896), Deleito y Piñuela (1963), Raymond (1986), Vigil (1986), Sánchez Lora (1988), Arenal and Schlau (1989), Hufton (1991), and Perry (1991).

⁷See biographical information in Olivares and Boyce, 1993: 269.

⁸See Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) and Wittig's *The Category of Sex* (1982).

⁹Rich defines "lesbian continuum" as including "a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support [...] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism'" (648-49).

¹⁰Speaking about the Hispanic context, Arenal and Schlau argue that cloistered nuns actually enjoyed greater freedom than their married counterparts *extramuros* and that "The importance of numerous convent communities in stimulating, conserving and developing Spanish intellectual life cannot be underestimated" (214).

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