

GENDER AND THE GAZE: SOR JUANA, LACAN, AND SPANISH BAROQUE POETRY

Matthew D. Stroud
Trinity University

There are few motifs more ubiquitous in Renaissance and Baroque poetry than those that link falling in love to the eyes. Based at least in part on Theophrastus, as Halstead has pointed out (113-20), this notion of love describes a process by which one is captivated by looking at the object of desire, prompting an exchange of humors or spirits. If the love is returned, both lovers feel complete and satisfied, but if the object of desire does not reciprocate, one feels empty because one has given one's soul to another while receiving nothing in return. Garcilaso's Soneto VIII is a splendid illustration of this relationship between love, eyes, and the soul:

De aquella vista pura y excelente
salen espíritus vivos y encendidos,
y siendo por mis ojos recibidos,
me pasan hasta donde el mal se siente;
encuétrase el camino fácilmente
por do lo mío, de tal calor movidos,
salen fuera de mí como perdidos,
llamados d'aquel bien que 'stá presente.
Ausente, en la memoria la imagino;
mis espíritus, pensando que la vían,
se mueven y se encienden sin medida;
mas no hallando fácil el camino,
que los suyos entrando derretían,
revientan por salir do no hay salida. (Rivers 44)

Here the love object is clearly feminine ("la imagino," "la vían"). Traditionally, because most poets of the time were men, it is assumed that the point of view is masculine and that the relationship between love and the eye most often described is that of a man captivated by the sight of a woman.

In recent decades, the study of the optics of love has been taken up by both feminist theory and psychoanalysis, with extraordinarily insightful results. One of its most important contributions has been

the (now self-evident) insight that the gaze of the man and the gaze of the woman are not equal, but are rather a function of the hierarchical relationships between the sexes and the structures of power. Thanks to the contribution of feminist readings, it is now apparent that the male gaze, granted preferential status by society, subjugates women, reducing them to a focal point or an object of representation. When viewed by a man as the object of his desire, woman is turned into an “uncanny stranger on display,” to paraphrase Hélène Cixous (“Laugh” 250); as Laura Mulvey asserts (27), she is represented as the fantasized object of the gaze. Woman is always in representation as the object of masculine desire: “on est toujours dans la représentation et, quand on demande à la femme de prendre place dans cette représentation, on lui demande, bien sûr, de représenter de désir de l’homme” (Cixous, “Entretien” 487). At the same time, masculine domination is self-reinforcing because men get pleasure from their position of authority over the woman-as-object and, especially in literature written by men, which is the vast majority, literary content itself is derived from imaginary male fantasies that view women in order to exploit them (Freedman 59). This authoritarian, if not totalitarian, gaze lies at the heart of the repression of women; as Stephen Heath notes, “If the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa’s head is not far off” (“Difference” 92). According to this perspective, the look of any man is an effort to objectify, subjugate, and fetishize any woman who is the object of the masculine gaze, and such a look is part of the larger symbolic universe of male dominance and erasure of “Woman” if not women. As an example drawn from Golden Age poetry, consider the following sonnet by Góngora:

De pura honestidad templo sagrado
 cuyo bello cimientó y gentil muro
 de blanco nácar y alabastro duro
 fue por divina mano fabricado;
 pequeña puerta de coral preciado,
 claras lumbreras de mirar seguro,
 que a la esmeralda fina el verde puro
 habéis para viriles usurpado;
 soberbio techo, cuyas cimbrias de oro,
 al claro sol, en cuanto en torno gira,
 ornan de luz, coronan de belleza;
 ídolo bello, a quien humilde adoro:
 oye piadoso al que por ti suspira,
 tus himnos canta y tus virtudes reza. (Rivers 209-10)

Although Góngora never identifies the object of his gaze as feminine, the use of familiar associations with femininity, such as red lips and white skin, lead us to assume that he refers to a woman who may be a wonder to behold, but who has in substantial ways ceased to be a woman or even human. Going beyond the simple notion of objectification, the object has been transformed into stone, a Pygmalion in reverse. This petrification is the basis of the conceit of the woman as emptied of subjectivity and serving only as the object of masculine desire.

Not surprisingly, women, even fictional ones from the seventeenth-century, resent and reject the effects of this objectifying, obliterating gaze, and not just in works by women. Mencía in Calderón's *El medico de su honra*, to borrow a bit from dramatic poetry, objects bitterly to the fact that the man's gaze has been used as a weapon in an attempt to hunt, trap, and ultimately dominate her:

Puso los ojos, para darme enojos,
un caballero en mí, que ¡ojalá fuera
basilisco de amor a mis despojos,
áspid de celos a mi primavera!
Luego el deseo sucedió a los ojos,
el amor al deseo, y de manera
mi calle festejó, que en ella vía
morir la noche, y espirar el día. (1.625-32; cf. 293)

In this passage, it is clear that the gaze is not just successively and inexorably more intense, but unwelcome (“para darme enojos”) and deadly (“basilisco,” “morir la noche, y espirar el día”).

Perhaps more to the point of the current study is the work by Betty Sasaki, who studies Sor Juana's “A su retrato” from a primarily feminist perspective. While bringing to bear the contributions of Stephanie Merrim, Emilie Bergmann, and others, Sasaki asserts Sor Juana's attempts to subvert “the reigning masculinist literary tradition” (14) while upholding the notion of the dominating male gaze of the assumed spectator (and reader). While the subjugation of women by means of the gaze, or perhaps more specifically, sight, is a fact, these uses of the term “gaze” and their consequences for men, women, and literary criticism reflect only part of the meaning of the gaze as put forth by Jacques Lacan. It was he, after all, who originated the current usage of the term in psychoanalytic literary theory, and the important French feminist theorists, such as Cixous and Irigaray, in substantial measure were reacting to Lacan's own view of the subject based on the primacy of phallic signification. The Lacanian gaze is not just related to the

object; when we are dealing with sight and the visible, the gaze is the missing object A, which, of course, is related to the desire of the Other.

Lacan went into considerable depth discussing the gaze and its workings in the scopic drive in *Four Fundamental Concepts* (101-05). When one is looked at, one is not merely the object of another's sight; rather, one is immediately defined by the fact that another subject is looking at, is holding the one looked at in his gaze. For the one looked at, the effect is not that of being seen simply by another human being, but as being captured by the gaze of the Other. The lacking subject, the subject marked by the missing object, is joined to the act of perception and an act of sight that goes both ways. When one looks at one's object of desire, one is also looked at, one is instantly defined in terms of the gaze of others, of the gaze of the Other: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (*Four Fundamental* 72). Lacan's ingenious insight regarding the position of the one who looks is perfectly in keeping with the Spanish Baroque as it is manifested in Velázquez's *Las meninas*: the viewer of a picture is not just the subject of sight; one is also placed in the position of the person seen if only by the virtual subject reflected in the gaze of the subjects in the painting who look out at the viewer. At the same time, one cannot perceive the same picture from all angles: as one moves closer or farther away, to one side or another, one may perceive radically different elements of the object on display. Lacan's famous example of the phenomenon of anamorphosis is that of Holbein's *The French Ambassadors*, in which a death's head appears only when viewed from a radically oblique angle (*Four Fundamental* 92-93). For Lacan, one simultaneously views a picture from the point of view of the subject gazing at an object, and one is called into the picture, a function of the object A, and the same is true for any object that falls under one's gaze. The lacking object A, which the picture cannot represent because it is lacking, acts as a lure to the viewer: there is "something whose absence can always be observed in a picture" (*Four Fundamentals* 108).

When one becomes aware that one is not just seeing but being seen, this realization represents a disorienting intrusion of otherness in both the imaginary and symbolic structures; the field of perception is consequently disorganized. Baroque literature, particularly in Spain, is full of the manifestations of this disorganization in its descriptions of distortions, deceptions, insecurities, and manipulations inherent in the nature of sight. Perception here is not merely considered to be a one-to-one geometric mapping; it is rather the intersection of object and subject, of gaze and sight. Even though it may be inanimate, any object that one looks at also "looks back at" the viewer because, in the imaginary, the subject is both caught up in the picture and alien to it,

lacking in it, at the same time (*Four Fundamental* 96). Lacan's metaphors for the processes of seeing are two: that of a punctiform geometral mapping and that of a screen. In the former one may have the illusion of domination by looking at the object: one appears to be able to apprehend the object in its entirety through the eyes. In the latter, one is oneself the object of the gaze of the other, the gaze of the Other; in other words, it is impossible for the subject to remain outside the relationship that it has to the object. The workings of the gaze create the situation in which the one who looks is oneself a picture: "What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside" (*Four Fundamental* 106). The difference between the subject as geometral viewer and as participant in the give and take between viewer and object causes one to become aware of the essential split in the subject that causes desire and makes the subject a subject (see *Four Fundamental* 84-85, 89). Because of the functioning of the gaze, one does not merely see the other (the thing, the picture, the object of one's desire), one realizes that one is being seen at the same time that one is seeing. Moreover, because the gaze sees itself and the lack that gives rise to it, it is not just that one sees oneself being seen by the other, one sees oneself seeing oneself (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 82). Quite naturally, being made aware of one's own lack through this process of being seen and seeing oneself being seen causes considerable anxiety related to the lack at the core of the subject (*Four Fundamental* 72-75, 80-82). In the imaginary, this relationship between the one seeing and the one seen, this scopic relationship, serves as a blind spot in one's imaginary conception of the world as totalizable and controllable. Reality for a subject is always inherently bound up in the relation of the gaze, a relation that means that what one sees is never reducible to objective facts but is always infused with subjectivity: "nothing of the world appears to me except in my representations" (*Four Fundamental* 81). In the real, the gaze causes the subject to be suspended in vacillation, to vanish into a point of optical perspective (*Four Fundamental* 83). As a result of the effects of the gaze in both the imaginary and the real effects, the subject simultaneously feels whole and disappears.

Two important comments need to be made regarding Lacan's view of the gaze. The first is that, in all this discussion, nowhere are roles assigned to masculine subjects and feminine objects. All subjects suffer the same processes regardless of whether they are men or women. Although Lacan was quite clear that the symbolic register is androcentric (*Séminaire* 2.261), here we are discussing the workings of the gaze in the imaginary and the real in which symbolically defined gender does not play a role. Second, both the traditional and the feminist views of the man looking at the woman imply the geometral

mapping: the man totalizes and objectifies the woman under his gaze. However, if one accepts Lacan's analysis, it is not possible to have only the punctiform mapping without an additional relationship of the screen. If one can point to examples of women objectified through the masculine gaze (the citations above from Góngora and Calderón are only two of literally thousands that could be brought to bear), there are numerous other examples of women who will not be dominated by the gaze, of women who have learned to play with the gaze for their own benefit, of women who are also capable of objectifying men, and of men who suffer from the effects of the gaze just as much as women do. In other words, as men try to objectify women in a totalizing gaze, they are also capable of being trapped by the gaze, and women are not powerless to use this fact to their own advantage.

Calderón again provides an obvious example of a woman playing with the gaze and its effects on men in *La dama duende*, in which Ángela arranges all sorts of situations that will cause Manuel to fall under her spell: ("estoy ya determinada / a que me vea," 1281-82), and the entire scene of the "principal mujer" at the beginning of Act 3 is a *tour de force* of Angela's ability to control Manuel's gaze by blindfolding him, then changing her appearance, then leading him astray by changing the context in which he is to interpret what he sees. A less extravagant poetic example of the effects of the gaze on men is the famous *madrigal* by Gutierre de Cetina in which the woman's gaze traps the man and makes him suffer and ask for more:

Ojos claros, serenos,
 si de un dulce mirar sois alabados,
 ¿por qué, si me miráis, miráis airados?
 Si cuanto más piadosos,
 más bellos parecéis a aquél que os mira,
 no me miréis con ira,
 porque no parezcáis menos hermosos.
 ¡Ay tormentos rabiosos!
 Ojos claros, serenos,
 ya que así me miráis, miradme al menos. (Rivers 82)

These variations underscore the essential nature of the gaze as a function of lack, and therefore of desire, sexuality, and the structure of subjectivity itself regardless of the gender of the subject or the object. Moreover, there is more to the gaze than symbolic domination. The symbolic usage of the eyes and the gaze simply cannot by itself account for all the uses of the gaze and its relationship to women, and, in significant ways, the symbolic structures of the gaze are not necessarily the most interesting effect of the gaze on a feminine subject. In addition

to its symbolic manifestations, it is useful to consider the broader workings of the gaze in the imaginary and especially the way they appear in poetry written by a woman. In order to focus on the workings of the gaze and its effects on women as both object and subject, the remainder of this study will be devoted to a number of poems by Sor Juana. Of course, when she writes, however, it is hard to know if we can trust that she writes from an authentic feminine position, or whether she has been phallicized, co-opted or objectified to the point that she is not capable of serving as a reliable example of women's writing.

There is simply no doubt that Sor Juana knew of and used to her advantage the received traditions about love and the eyes. More to the point, one might actually say that Sor Juana intuited the tricky relationship among eyes, gaze, sight, subject, object, masculine, feminine, imaginary, and symbolic later discussed by Lacan. Starting with an easy, famous example, Sor Juana's "Redondillas," while not specifically focusing on eyes and the gaze, include references to the optics of love and domination in her overall condemnation of the treatment of women by men. Primarily through the use of the words "buscar" and "hallar," Sor Juana brings into play the paradoxical vision that men have of women, a vision that both objectifies them and forces them into an untenable and impossible situation:

Queréis con presunción necia
hallar a la que buscáis,
para pretendida, Thais,
y en la posesión, Lucrecia. (16-19)
Dan vuestras amantes penas
a sus libertades alas,
y después de hacerlas malas
las queréis hallar muy buenas. (45-48)
Pues ¿para qué os espantáis
de la culpa que tenéis?
Queredlas cual las hacéis
o hacedlas cual las buscáis. (57-60, Sor Juana 228-29)

Each of these three *redondillas* uses "buscar" or "hallar" to mean "see," "consider," and even "fantasize." An additional scopic reference is found in the use of mirror in the following *estrofa*:

¿Qué humor puede ser más raro
que el que, falta de consejo,
él mismo empaña el espejo
y siente que no esté claro? (21-24)

The mirror of the man's imaginary fantasy is sullied by the man's own abuse of the woman who is the object of his gaze. In other words, the woman here serves only as a function of the man's imaginary gaze, a gaze that, because of the social power of men, is symbolized as a generalized cultural norm. When a man sees a woman only as a wife, a sex object, a servant, a possession, or even, as in Góngora's sonnet, a marvelous architectural object of amorous contemplation, the poet's imaginary gaze can be said as well to serve the symbolic register, the phallic function, social conservatism, law and order.

The imaginary register is essentially that of the ego as structured by the basic incompleteness of the subject. One desires what one sees because one imagines that the acquisition or appropriation of the object will make one whole, whether the object is financial, territorial, hierarchical, or sexual, and, again, at this level it doesn't necessarily matter whether the object is masculine or feminine. The sight of the love object itself triggers the desire, and, consequently, an instant euphoria, a joy in the hope of fulfillment, as we see in the opening lines of the *glosa*, "Que explica conceptos de amante":

Luego que te vi te amé;
 porque amarte y ver tu Cielo,
 bien pudieron ser dos cosas,
 pero ninguna primero. (Sor Juana 272)

The imaginary gaze is so powerful and antithetical to the reason and logic of the symbolic that it can interrupt speech itself:

Hablar me impiden los ojos;
 y es que se anticipan ellos
 viendo lo que he de decirte,
 a decírtelo primero. (Sor Juana 24)

The hope is that the object of desire can erase all the cares and anxieties felt by the split subject: "¿Cuándo veré tus ojos, dulce encanto, / y de los míos quitarás el llanto?" (Sor Juana 314). Desire cannot exist except as a function of the incompleteness of, or lack in, the subject. If one were whole, one would or could desire nothing. Thus, at the same time that one experiences the euphoria associated with the expectation of wholeness and completion, the look, the gaze, also calls into question the validity of the imaginary identification itself, threatening to expose the lack underneath. If one desires some object, that means one does not possess it, or at least enough of it, meaning that one feels incomplete. The otherness that the look embodies underscores the lack

of completion of the subject, usually because of the threat of not being looked at. Presence always captions absence:

Me acerco y me retiro:
 ¿quién sino yo hallar puedo
 a la ausencia en los ojos
 la presencia en lo lejos? (Sor Juana 203)

One of the more vexing aspects of studying the optics of love is the confusion in both the terminology and the usage of the concepts of the gaze, the eye, sight. While it is clear that Golden Age poets frequently used “ojos,” “mirar,” and other optical terminology in a variety of ways, it is also clear that they at least intuited something like the Lacanian gaze, which is neither sight nor the eye (*Four Fundamental* 84). Rather than being a simple function of one person looking at another, the gaze is both a process and an effect related to the lack that inhabits everything that one sees and does, and causes the desire, the subversion, and the dislocation that are characteristic of the human subject. One of the best examples of the fact that the gaze is more a function of the human subjectivity than of sight is the fact that the blind are also subject to the gaze, including those whom love has made metaphorically blind:

*Aunque cegué de mirarte
 ¿qué importa cegar o ver,
 si gozos que son del alma
 también un ciego los ve?*
 Cuando el Amor intentó
 hacer tuyos mis despojos,
 Lysi, y la luz me privó,
 me dió en el alma los ojos,
 que en el cuerpo me quitó. (. . .)
 Aquí en el alma veré
 el centro de mis cuidados
 con los ojos de mi fe:
 que gustos imaginados
 también un ciego los ve. (1-9, 40-44; Sor Juana 273-74)

This poem is an example of a frequent strategy employed by Sor Juana: writing from a masculine point of view, as we see in this additional *quintilla*:

De mi vida la conquista
 tuvo término en quererte
 y porque jamás resista,
 Celia, hasta llegar a verte
 solamente tuve vista. (Sor Juana 272)

One who desires to be loved essentially tries to capture or incorporate the other in oneself as an object, but this attempt to incorporate the object of desire is not limited only to men. The dislocating, decentering effects of the amorous gaze apply to both genders. Perhaps because sexual identification is a symbolic construction, in the imaginary there is no difference. The same kind of attraction usually felt by men toward women, with an emphasis on imaginary fantasy, also appears in this sonnet written from a woman's point of view:

Detente, sombra de mi bien esquivo,
 imagen del hechizo que más quiero,
 bella ilusión por quien alegre muero,
 dulce ficción por quien penosa vivo.
 Si al imán de tus gracias atractivo,
 sirve mi pecho de obediente acero
 ¿para qué me enamoras lisonjero
 si has de burlarme luego fugitivo?
 Mas blasonar no puedes satisfecho
 de que triunfa de mí tu tiranía;
 que aunque dejas burlado el lazo estrecho
 que tu forma fantástica ceñía,
 poco importa burlar brazos y pecho
 si te labra prisión mi fantasía. (Sor Juana 287-88)

In numerous ways Sor Juana appears to accept the idea that the gaze is not gender-specific, and undermines the notion that the only position for a woman is that of passive, victimized object. She goes beyond a simple classification as a woman poet writing about the objectification of women under a masculine gaze. She writes poems from both masculine and feminine points of view, and some in which the genders of both the one seeing and the one seen are left unstated. In no way was her vision of the world limited by her gender.

Love represents an important manifestation of the gaze in the imaginary because in love there is always a specular, alienating component of narcissism: one loves one's own ego realized on the imaginary level. The attraction one feels is far from being unalloyed pleasure. In some respects, it is an endless series of miscommunications, leading ultimately to rivalry, a fight to the death for triumph:

Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante;
al que amante me sigue, dejo ingrata;
constante adoro a quien mi amor maltrata;
maltrato a quien mi amor busca constante.

Al que trato de amor, hallo diamante,
y soy diamante al que de amor me trata;
triumfante quiero ver al que me mata,
y mato a quien me quiere ver triunfante. (1-8; Sor Juana 289)

One is, at least as far as the symbolic register is concerned, out of control, alien to oneself. As Lacan put it so succinctly, “When you are in love, you are mad” (*Seminar* 1.142). There is a kind of obligation in the imaginary relative to the lure of the gaze; it is extremely difficult both not to be affected by gazing upon the object of one’s desire and not to be captured by the look of the other. So insistent is desire that love in the imaginary exists whether or not the object wishes it to, or, indeed, whether or not there is an object, an other that acts as a lure, at all (Lacan, *Seminar* 1.141-42), and whether or not the subject is male or female. There is a certain inevitability, a loss of control, when confronted with the gaze of another.

Because the gaze is only a specular image, an other can only appear as an alter ego, as it were, with which one can never be joined, as well as one’s own reflection. This ephemeral quality leads to inevitable disappointment. Desire interrupts the geometrical scopic mapping, and not just because it captions the subject’s own lack, but because the gaze of others that calls to that lack in the subject disorganizes the field of perception. The subversive functioning of desire causes the visible to be the realm most subject to misunderstanding, to ambiguity, to alibi (Lacan, *Four Fundamentals* 77, 83). The look, like all imaginary lures, is ultimately a source not of certainty but of *méconnaissance*; the gaze always “leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 77). As it becomes short circuited, the subject’s desire both misses its mark and is returned to the sender. The gaze is the concrete locus in the imaginary of deception as well as such manifestations as travesty, camouflage, masquerade, violence, and the familiar rivalry to the death. Like a *trompe l’oeil*, deception to the eyes (*engaño a los ojos*) is a “triumph of the gaze over the eye” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 103):

Éste, que ves, engaño colorido,
 que del arte ostentando los primores,
 con falsos silogismos de colores
 es cauteloso engaño del sentido;
 éste, en quien la lisonja ha pretendido
 excusar de los años los horrores
 y venciendo del tiempo los rigores
 triunfar de la vejez y del olvido,
 es un vano artificio del cuidado,
 es una flor al viento delicada,
 es un resguardo inútil para el hado,
 es una necia diligencia errada,
 es un afán caduco y, bien mirado,
 es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada. (Sor Juana 277)

The perspective of this poem is epicene, as is the case with many of Sor Juana's poems, and illustrates that the effects of the imaginary apply for women as well as for men.

There is simply no doubt that women are the recipients of the sexist symbolic perpetuated by men. Even Sor Juana's own complaint about the "Hombres necios" demonstrates the validity of the notion. Nevertheless, the gaze causes multiple effects depending on the register and the position of the subject as one who sees or one who is seen. In these few poems by Sor Juana, one can either conclude that women are more than just passive, inert objects of the gaze, or that women's poetry, at least that of Sor Juana and maybe that of all Golden Age poets, is so phallicized that there is no possibility of writing from a truly feminine point of view, or that the poets sensed that the imaginary workings of the optics of love were not different for men and women. As anachronistic as it seems, Golden Age poets appear to anticipate Lacanian insight by several centuries, intuiting both the bidirectional relationship between the subject and the object of the gaze and the imaginary gaze unrestricted by gender. Moreover, there appears to be an almost conscious attempt to break the gender barriers; men such as Calderón wrote as women characters, Sor Juana writes frequently from a masculine point of view. It may fall far short of gender equality, but Sor Juana's poetry, and Golden Age literature in general, seems always to be open to playing around with what ought to have been rigid norms. Perhaps this blurring of the lines of masculine and feminine speaks more to the fact that this poetry was written long before the nineteenth-century crystallized concepts of men, women, and their prescribed heterosexual behaviors. As Jonathan Katz has pointed out, our current notions of sex roles, based on an agreed-upon notion of heterosexuality, is quite new and linked to all sorts of things unknown or unspoken in

the seventeenth-century: the middle class, psychoanalysis and psychopathology, homosexuality, and the like (12, 36, 21-23, for example). Sor Juana may not be the best poet to represent women, and it may turn out that we are simply incapable of discerning the nature of women writing in such a pre-feminist, pre-psychoanalytic, pre-heterosexual era. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that women in the Golden Age were able to express themselves in poetry as full participants in the human condition, and not only as symbolized objects of the masculine gaze.

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