

ON THE DIVINITY OF  
SOR JUANA'S VIRGIN MARY:  
A QUESTION OF FEMINIST HETERODOXY OR  
INTERCULTURAL AGENCY?

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With the exception of Eve, no female biblical figure has been as impelling a force behind the monumental effort on the part of the Christian imagination to represent spiritual realities as has been the Virgin Mary. Scarcely mentioned in the gospels directly, countless visual and textual portraits of the Virgin have succeeded in transforming the historical mother of Jesus into a holy figure closely rivaling, at least in the Catholic world, those of the Trinity. This combination of historical and fictional—or perhaps more precisely, “mythical,” being can be said to have captured the Catholic imagination in a continuous cycle of creation and recreation of an ever virgin Mary and her seemingly contradictory status as mother, bride and daughter of the Christ. To date, Marina Warner’s 1976 *Alone of All Her Sex*, Jaroslav Pelikan’s 1996 work *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, and the more recent book by Sarah Jane Boss *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (2000) have been the most comprehensive studies to demonstrate that these reconfigurations of the Virgin have taken place in artistic, theological and political waves, as concerns and motives changed throughout the ages.

The overwhelming majority of critics who have investigated the Virgin Mary in Sor Juana specifically have generally agreed with Josefina Muriel’s conclusion (perhaps a bit overstated): “[e]n todo el pensamiento de Sor Juana, no hay nota alguna discordante con la ortodoxia católica y sí hay una armonía perfecta con el cristianismo de su tiempo. No hay posición crítica ante punto alguno del dogma, antes por el contrario, reafirmación apasionada de las verdades en que cree, que vive y en las cuales muere” (1994, 253). The 1993 article by Linda Egan “Donde Dios todavía es mujer: Sor Juana y la teología feminista,” published in *Y diversa de mí misma entre vuestras plumas ando*, differs

greatly with this view and concludes instead that Sor Juana does not affirm the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rather she develops a theology concerned with deconstructing “la Trinidad masculina y reconstruirla a base de un principio femenino” (327, 330). This is by far the boldest statement made regarding both Sor Juana’s religious views in general and her employment of the Virgin Mary in particular; and as such it deserves a closer look.

Before delving into Sor Juana’s treatment of the Virgin Mary in her verses in order to answer the question: is her Virgin Mary divine, as well as to refute some of the arguments Egan uses to affirm Sor Juana indeed argues Mary is equivalent to God, I wish first to underscore the patriarchal and colonial conditions under which Sor Juana wrote. I do this at the risk of stating the obvious to some readers in order to stress to others that these conditions unquestionably refereed her writing and must always be taken into consideration when reading her work. Doubly subjected to external authorities, Sor Juana was a Jeronimite nun who lived and worked within the confines of a highly structured religious institution, a “female culture” (Paz 118) existing within a larger patriarchal one; and while for a time she enjoyed ties to the vice-regal court of New Spain, the freedom of her thought and expression both as a woman and as a *criolla* were carefully limited. Though she lived in a society defined by its heterogeneity (Leonard 65, Paz 32-33), it was a masculine artistic tradition she inherited (Paz 45). While hers was not a lone female voice,<sup>1</sup> she was exceptional in her thematic foci. Most often her female contemporaries wrote within the mystical tradition; Sor Juana was however, as Electa Arenal states: “above all an intellectual” (129); she was a “rationalist” (Leonard 260) and for many “a genius” (Lerner 33).<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, many literary critics have labeled her a feminist; and this has sometimes overshadowed other perspectives of her work.

Renowned feminist historian Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, treats the topic of the “educational disadvantaging of women”; she briefly recounts Sor Juana’s biography (33-36), a life she maintains is exemplary of “women of extraordinary talent who, despite all obstacles, acquired an education and produced intellectual work of great quality” (33). The author asserts that the religious sphere was, in fact, the first in which women sought to expand their rights, and that there and elsewhere the first struggle was to achieve access to education (11). Sor Juana clearly fits within this greater context of early feminist activity as both a nun and an erudite spokeswoman for women’s right to education. For this reason, above all others, it is fair to ascribe to Sor Juana a feminist consciousness, defined by Lerner as: “The awareness of women that they belong to a

subordinate group; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination" (14). It is imprudent however to place Sor Juana's proto-feminism above all other considerations when analyzing her work, as she also had a number of other already mentioned defining characteristics, in addition to the fact that her intellectual pursuits led her to interests that went beyond the scope of social inequalities centered on gender.<sup>3</sup>

This said, Sor Juana's role as a nun and her religious writings have traditionally received little critical attention in comparison to that given her role as woman and writer, and to her secular poetry and prose (Sabat de Rivers "Ejercicios de la Encarnación" 947; Lavrin 61). This gap, however, was somewhat reduced after a proliferation of publications in and around 1995 commemorated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sor Juana's death, increasing the number of studies dedicated to her large body of *letras sacras*. In the years since, a handful of articles have been added to the growing list.

A variety of conclusions concerning the Virgin Mary in Sor Juana's work can be found in these and previous studies, which on the whole focus on the Virgin's role as feminine model. Sabat de Rivers noted the particular stress placed by Sor Juana on Mary as an active rather than passive figure ("Ejercicios" 949); while Bénassy-Berling pointed to the emphasis Sor Juana put on God's gift to Mary of universal knowledge<sup>4</sup> (*Humanismo y religión* 257); Scott observes as well the references to Mary in the *Carta respuesta a Sor Filotea* as "Mother of the Word," "Queen of Wisdom" and "Author of the Magnificat" (52). Some of the few studies that deal exclusively with the Virgin Mary in Sor Juana are written by Georgina Sabat de Rivers, who in her 1992 article on the *Ejercicios de la Encarnación*, concludes that Sor Juana makes an effort to create a distinct image of the Virgin, one that is atypical in that it does not portray Mary as both docile and gentle (949). She proposes that the Virgin offers Sor Juana not only a feminine model, but also one that was "teológica y moralmente irrefutable" (950), insinuating a need for legitimacy; something Margo Glantz also suggests (522). Carmen Montáñez has stated that in the *Ejercicios devotos* Sor Juana expresses a desire to imitate the Virgin in obedience and humility, not only before God, but before the hierarchy of the Church; which she does, but not without also finding in Mary a model for female wisdom (629). Ultimately, however, within the context of the *Ejercicios*, Mary's role as *theotokos*—the Mother of God—is most underscored, and she is clearly presented as secondary (Sabat de Rivers "Ejercicios" 954). These conclusions are signaled in the very beginning sections of the *Ejercicios*

themselves, where Sor Juana explains her fundamental purpose: “Como digo, el fin es sólo que se haga en estos días algún servicio del Señor, en señal de reconocimiento a la singular fineza de encarnar por nuestro amor, y darle gracias por haber elegido tal Madre; y cualquiera cosa que se haga en su obsequio y reverencia será grata a Su Majestad” (849). In a later article, Sabat de Rivers focused on Sor Juana’s religious poetry on Saint Peter; but she began by first summarizing her treatment of Mary, one she saw characterized by: “la exaltación de ... [ella] como mujer fuerte y letrada, máximo ejemplo y guía para la mujer” (“Poesía religiosa” 67).

As already noted, Linda Egan, however, is at significant variance from the critics just mentioned. I came across her radical proposition while conducting research for a project on Sor Juana’s *villancicos de la Asunción*, a set of seven series of poems all written within a period of fifteen years (1676, 1677, 1679, 1681, 1685, 1686 and 1690); all of which were sung in the Cathedral of the vice-regal capital, except for one (1681) which was written to be sung in Puebla. Three are considered “atribuibles” (1677, 1681 and 1686). Although the *villancicos* were too limited a basis for drawing any significant conclusions on the Virgin Mary in Sor Juana, the conclusions Egan pronounced demanded further investigation and successfully side tracked me from my original project. Some of what I have found in the *villancicos* substantiates Egan’s conclusion that Sor Juana’s Virgin Mary is a feminine principle upon which the Trinity is reconstructed; but there remains serious doubt over its unconditional validity given what refutes it.

One of the most glaringly problematic aspects of sorjuanismo in general is the implication of (or perhaps a desire for) unity, harmony and systematic architecture to Sor Juana’s thought over time and throughout a large body of work. Sor Juana’s brilliance, her undeniable capacity to construct complex arguments and her literary genius no doubt would have allowed her to mastermind a methodically constructed theology that leads to the equation: “Isis es Dios, Isis es María, María es Dios” (Egan 333),<sup>5</sup> and even that “la María sorjuanina es una diedad, una persona de Dios en la Trinidad” (327). But such a design is flawless only if we disregard the uncertainty and spontaneity inherent in the artistic process as well as ignore those elements of poetic inspiration that contradict or defy facile categorization, all of which contribute significantly to the production of an entire body of work over time.

On the one hand, the idea that Sor Juana would create a hidden, but identifiably feminist theology appears to exemplify Paz’s view that in the seventeenth century “theology ... [was] a mask for politics” (56), which in Sor Juana’s case is clearly a politics of gender.<sup>6</sup> On the other

hand, Sor Juana would be quite an amazing mastermind of anti-Trinitarian heresy if indeed she were able to encode it so well that it took three hundred years for us to learn her secret. Sor Juana can only be portrayed in this manner by omitting reference to all contradictions to this uniformity and by dismissing her retractions (McKnight 252) as evidence of a fear of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, or as a form of self-censorship (Egan 329) —an immediate issue that is ultimately impossible to refute.

Silence is clearly an important trope in some of Sor Juana's writing. The context in which references to fear and silence occur is largely the *Carta respuesta a Sor Filotea*, which Frederick Luciani cautions us against reading too literally. As he states: "all autobiography contains elements of self-invention, that the self evoked is—in varying degrees but inevitably—fictive, metaphorical, a *rhetorical construct* (emphasis mine, 74). That is to say, Sor Juana is manipulating her (male) reader with her "silences" that speak volumes.<sup>7</sup> References to fear in the *Carta respuesta* may well be fully sincere, but Bénassy-Berling questions the atmosphere of persecution assumed to surround Sor Juana at the time of her "crisis" as presented by Paz (402-410). She studies two documents that indicate first, that the archbishop Aguiar y Seijas "no era tan malo como lo pintan," and second, that he and Fernando de Santa Cruz were not enemies in 1693 ("Sobre dos textos" 85). At the end of her article she makes the point that Fernández de Santa Cruz could not have been that upset with Sor Juana to permit to be published, or to publish himself, the openly feminist *villancicos a Santa Catarina* in 1692 (89). Even the revelation of the new Sor Juana text: *Carta de Serafina* introduced to the interested public by Elías Trabulse in 1996, has not completely answered all the questions there are regarding Sor Juana's life from 1690 to her death.<sup>8</sup> None of this necessarily refutes the role of self-censorship in Sor Juana's writing, but it does demonstrate that Sor Juana's final years still remain rather mysterious.

Some of the texts on the basis of which Egan concludes that Sor Juana constructed a feminist theology centered on the Virgin Mary are her *auto sacramentales* and the *loas* that introduce them. The gender of allegorical figures is used to imply that somehow Sor Juana intended that they be understood to represent gendered beings: "una figura femenina, Profecía" (Egan 328); "la Trinidad femenina Pensamiento, Inteligencia y Conjetura" (333); "la femenina Causa Primera" (337); etc. If Octavio Paz is correct in concluding that "Sor Juana's ultimate victory is to adopt the Neoplatonic maxim: souls have no sex" (85), it seems unlikely that she would have deviated from the standard use of allegory to signify an embodied metaphor that, as Barbara Kurtz explains in relation to Calderón de la Barca's *autos*, are to be

“understood ... platonically as the abstract of universal created by God” (269). That is, they are neither gendered nor androgynous; they are an *absence* of gender.

On two occasions Sor Juana defines allegory in the *loas* that precede two of her *autos*. In the *loa* that accompanies *El Divino Narciso*, Religion speaks to America explaining why these abstract concepts are represented physically: “una idea / metafórica, vestida / de retóricos colores, / representable a tu vista, / te mostraré; que ya / conozco que tú te inclinas / a objetos visibles, más / que a lo que la Fe te avisa / por el oído; y así, / es preciso que te sirvas / de los ojos, para que / por ellos la Fe recibas” (389). And again, in the *loa* to *El cetro de José*, Idolatry defines herself before Faith: “Soy, por más que tú me ultrajes, / la que sabrá defender / fueros de edades tan largas, / pues Alegórica Idea, / Consideración abstracta/ soy, [...]” (467-68). While allegories are embodied in the actual performance of the *auto* by those portraying them, and are as such sexed bodies, it does not follow that the concept is *of* that sex, or necessarily representative of a particular gender.

In the case in which *Profecía* is referred to as “feminine” in *El cetro de José*, there are two problems; the first is the already mentioned question of engendering allegorical figures, and the second is the selective quotation from the *auto*. While Egan writes that Prophecy claims to be the Spirit of God, implying that Sor Juana envisioned this feminine principle as a substitute for the Holy Spirit, careful examination reveals this is not entirely accurate. For one, the *auto* is set in the historical period of the Old Testament and Prophecy fulfills her duty of foretelling the coming of Christ. Sor Juana’s text continues and demonstrates that Prophecy is not perceived a member of the Trinity: “El espíritu de Dios / soy, que a Josef acompaña, / de Profesía” (491). Prophecy, whether a “feminine” figure or not, claims nothing more than to fulfill its logical function: “soy yo quien profetizo / al mundo su remedio, / su fortuna a los Tribus” (495).

The strongest declaration Sor Juana makes that in her view the Virgin Mary is not God is found in the series of thirty-two poems entitled: *Letras de San Bernardo*. When Egan refers to *letra XX* (no. 342) she states that in this poem Mary takes the place of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity (328). The poems were written for the dedication in 1690 of the church for the convent of St. Bernard in Mexico City. *Letra I* (no. 323) establishes Mary as the best Temple of God (understood here specifically to signify convent), in whose name any such Temple should be dedicated (296). In this *letra* Mary is one of St. Bernard’s two “Dueños,” and the *estribillo* that follows includes St. Bernard, Mary and God as a trinity that imitates the Holy Trinity: “Porque los Tres, haciendo / sagrada liga, / la Trinidad imiten / con alta cifra” (296). In

the *letra XX*, the opening verse refers to the “Templo, Bernardo, y María” and the poetic subject “yo” looks for the connection between the three entities: “andando de texto en texto / buscando conexión” (306). In an exercise that, on the one hand, offers religious explanation, and on the other, negates the authority of the poetic subject (“Mas no, no, no, no: / que yo no soy sastre / de tanto primor” [306]), Sor Juana presents four premises that signal the connection between the three primary elements that open the poem. The first is that on the day of the dedication of the Temple both Mary and God must enter it, followed by the second that explains why: “Pues Bernardo nunca puede / estar solo sin los Dos; / pues el alma le dio a Cristo / y a Madre María, / Cristo su Hermano mayor.”

The fourth premise, from which Egan draws the conclusion that Mary takes the place of the Holy Spirit, is less clear than the previous three: “Que quien se lo dio a Bernardo, / a María se lo dio, / pues en bienes de los Tres / no se admite división.” The referents of the two terms, “lo” and “Tres” are ambiguous. What exactly is the “it” given to both Mary and St. Bernard? Considering that this is the final strophe of the poem, it is reasonable to suggest that Sor Juana returns to the original poetic question, that of the connection between the Temple, St. Bernard and Mary; and further, that the “it” given to St. Bernard is the temple/convent, which is then also given to Mary—as implied in the first poem of the series that establishes Mary’s participation in the dedication of any temple. The “Tres” in this case is more likely to be the Temple, St. Bernard and Mary, who receive the riches of divine presence. Admittedly, Sor Juana is ambiguous, but given the opening tripartite element in the poem, it seems logical to assume that she is referring to that “trinity” rather than the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. More importantly, in the subsequent *letra*, XXVII (no. 349), Sor Juana avoids any possible equation of Christ with Mary: “Cristo es Lilio, y María / es parecido” (310). Sor Juana goes farther and declares that Mary is not God: “María no es Dios, pero es / quien más a Dios se parece; / y Bernardo tanto crece, / que a los Dos se ha parecido” (310). Sor Juana delineates a clear hierarchy of divinity: “y con un orden gallardo, / graduando la mayoría, / se parece a Dios María, / y a María, el gran Bernardo” (310). A similarly direct statement appears in her *Profesión de votos* (1694) when she states that she believes Mary “*es todo lo que no es ser Dios*” (Glantz 524). Of course, it could be argued that Sor Juana must represent orthodox thinking directly, while covertly presenting theological heresy elsewhere.

Egan concludes from the scene in *El Divino Narciso* in which Christ is submerged in the water fountain and becomes one with Human Nature, that Christ and Mary become one given the symbolic



association of Mary with water (327). But water is also closely associated with the Holy Spirit, whose action is baptism (1 Corinthians).<sup>9</sup> Even if here water is used to signify Mary, a different interpretation might conclude that *through* her, Christ and Human Nature are united. In this way, the Virgin acts in her traditional role as intermediary between human and divine; she is *via aqueducta*. And, if Christ and Mary do become one, it is a unity that is not original to Sor Juana; it represents what is referred to theologically as the hypostatic union, the intimate relationship between Christ and Other (Herrán 177). In *El cetro de José* there is another representation of this type of union when Jacob is similarly united with God (497).

When significant factors interfere with the clear understanding of a composition or when we are distanced from the original time and place of creation and reception, an important element of literary interpretation is the proper contextualization of a writer's work. Egan acknowledges that Sor Juana wrote within a hermetic and Gnostic tradition (339), however Sor Juana's writing, exceptional as it may have been, participated in a literary heritage that greatly informed her work. To better understand how Sor Juana was not the inventor of the vast majority of names she gives the Virgin, of how many of her references to God, Christ and Mary shared in a long-standing tradition, the work of Laurentino Herrán, *Mariología poética española* (1988), is indispensable. Beyond the Hispanic tradition, Patrizia Mizcozzi testifies to the biblical and other religious sources for many of the symbols used to signify the Virgin Mary.

One example of an instance in which it is implied that Sor Juana is exceptional in her references is when Sor Juana mentions Adam exclusively in relation to original sin, overlooking Eve (Egan 328). While the author does not explicitly state that this is a revisionist move on Sor Juana's part, the following paragraph asserts that Sor Juana is indeed concerned with ascribing new meanings to biblical and theological suppositions. It was not completely uncommon to speak of Adam's sin; for example, in Lope de Vega's auto sacramental *Las aventuras del hombre*, the allegorical figure Consuelo reprimands Adam for blaming Eve for sin, and says to him: "No la culpéis, que vos la culpa tenéis" (Herrán 105). The sixteenth-century Spanish poet López de Ubeda, in a poem dedicated to the *Inmaculada*, the Virgin Mary is deemed without original sin *ab aeterno* because "cuando Adam peccó / ya estauades presseruada" (Herrán 155). And yet again in Lope de Vega, also arguing in favor of the Immaculate Conception, one finds Adam the source of original sin, which the Virgin Mary purifies in her role as the mother of the Redeemer. "Si sois la que escoge Dios / por medio para expiar / lo que Adán quiso manchar, / ¿por qué ha de haber



culpa en vos?" (Herrán 206). Even if Sor Juana was unaware of these or other cases in which Adam rather than Eve is held responsible for original sin, her own famous *redondilla* "Hombres necios que acusáis" offers a conceptual model for holding men accountable for the negative behavior they inspire in women (no. 92, 109). While the analogy is admittedly an imperfect one, it does indicate that for Sor Juana, the greater social power men held in society led them to be active rather than reactive forces, and for that reason were more responsible for any consequences resulting from those same actions.

Egan states that Sor Juana "le da a la Virgen María una proliferación de nombres o andróginos o representantes de la soberanía de una diosa pagana" and then lists those names: "Emperatriz Suprema, Reina Soberana de los Cielos, [...] Maestra Divina, Sabiduría, Luciente Aurora, *matutina Luz*, Luna, Reina de la Luz, Aguila, Arbol de Vida, Minerva Divina, etcetera" (327); but again, Sor Juana was not alone in referring to the Virgin Mary as such. It was exceptionally common in Spain during the time of the *reconquista* to use terms as "Reina de los cielos," "Reina poderosa" and "Emperatriz valerosa" when summoning the Virgin Mary to aid soldiers in their battles (Herrán 49-50, 88). In Gregorio Silvestre, a Spanish writer of the sixteenth century, she is "el árbol del paraíso, / que nos dio el fruto de vida" (Herrán 149). References to the Virgin that appear to be pagan in tone, particularly "Luna," are found in the writings of St. Justin (second century), and continue throughout the ninth and tenth centuries in the writings of both secular and religious authors. The Book of Revelation is a significant source for celestial metaphors and symbols of light used as names for the Virgin as well (Mizcozzi 106-07). As already seen in the case regarding Adam's sin, Lope de Vega also refers to Mary as "la Sabiduría eterna," as well as "Reina, oliva, fuente, cedro, azucena, ciudad, nave, torre, paraíso, espejo, trono, ventana, sol, madre" (Herrán 790); and in one poem of his, the parallel to the Holy Spirit is exceptionally powerful: "pasa la blanca niña, / que es la paloma blanca / que con el ramo verde / eterna paz señala" (Herrán 202-3). In this way, Sor Juana's various names for the Virgin Mary are better understood as borrowed from a large repertoire of poetic terms.

Ultimately Sor Juana's participation in a tradition of Marian poetry must be understood in the context of the Counterreformation and its importance to Marian issues. Pelikan stresses that Marian devotion was a significant dividing line between Protestants and Catholics (154); and Muriel notes that Sor Juana was aware of a perceived "loss" to the number of her devotees resulting from the Reformation (222). This is particularly critical to understanding the religious atmosphere in which Sor Juana lived, since Marian devotion became a sign of Catholicism

insofar as it denied the Protestant affirmation of Christ as sole mediator between human and divine (155).

In addition to the macro-politics at work (the split between Protestant and Catholic), the micro-politics of divisions between religious orders was at play as well. During the Baroque, two schools of theological thought predominated within the Catholic sphere: the Dominican and the Jesuit (Melquíades v. II, 12), and both differed on the issue of Mary's role in human salvation. The debate centered on the controversies surrounding the Immaculate Conception, which in turn related to issues of co-redemption—that both Christ and Mary redeemed Adam and Eve's sin (Herrán 160, 176-7). The Dominicans, who were the Inquisitors of the Holy Office, supported their arguments against the Immaculate Conception with the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas. One of the most important writers on the Trinity (Davies 185), he was also a proponent of maintaining Mary as primarily human; in his view the Christ could only redeem humans if he was too (Davies 194). The contemplative order of the *Concepcionistas* stood for the adoption of the Immaculate Conception as dogma since as early as 1489, when it was founded posthumously in Spain in the name of St. Beatriz de la Silva by her followers. Although the order was subsequently brought to the Americas and was in existence in Sor Juana's Mexico, given that the Immaculate Conception was in no way dogma, Sor Juana was careful in arguing for it in her writing (Glantz 528). Martha Lilia Tenorio states that the *villancicos* offer Sor Juana the opportunity to enter into the debate and argue a position, but she stresses that Sor Juana was charged with celebrating the Virgin, it wasn't a theme she freely choose (93-94). Moreover, these were—as Sor Juana herself expressed, literary exercises (121). Nevertheless Michelle Gonzalez rightly argues that however obligated Sor Juana may have been in writing about the Virgin, the way in which she represents her was “entirely her creation” (60).

While seemingly unrelated to the issues of Mary's divinity and/or humanity, another important difference between Dominican and Jesuit thought might very well be significant to Sor Juana's “feminist theology.” During the period in which she lived an extremely important debate raged over the question of human will versus divine authority. The Dominicans stressed divine authority, the Jesuits human will (Melquíades Martínez v. II, 12). Considering the importance of such questions to Sor Juana (Paz 394), her close friendship with the Jesuit-trained Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, and her sarcastic references to St. Thomas in the *Carta respuesta a Sor Filotea* (827), it seems likely that these issues influenced her portrayal of the Virgin's divinity, even if only indirectly. That is, as a proponent of the Jesuit school stressing

*libre albedrío*, and standing in opposition to St. Thomas's views on Mary and his negative ideas on women in general (Davies 14), Sor Juana's Virgin Mary becomes all the more divine and can be used additionally to support the advancement of women's position in society. Even without any of the religious perils that an accusation of anti-Trinitarian heresy may have, if Sor Juana is to be accused of it, it's only fair that the religious context of her writing be key to understanding any theological arguments she may have been making in her literary works.

Despite these criticisms, there remains the principal reason why it is impossible to flatly negate the accusation of heterodoxy. In the *villancicos* written to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption, the Virgin Mary is repeatedly represented as the unifying principle of the Trinity. In the 1679 series her relationship to each as "Hija, Madre y Esposa" (no. 257, 240) makes more comprehensible their unity. Again in 1681, each member of the Trinity exercises a particular function in relation to her:

El padre aguarda a María  
con la celestial diadema,  
que por Hija la corona  
hoy su poderosa diestra.  
El Hijo, en trono de luces  
y de majestad inmensa,  
como a Princesa la ensalza  
y como Madre la espera.  
El Espíritu divino  
el Tálamo le adereza,  
que la mira como Esposa  
y como tal la celebra. (no. xl, 348)

While Mary is presented as central to the three elements of the Trinity, she doesn't however substitute for any. Is she, as Luisa Ruiz Moreno suggests, an "appendix" to the Trinity? "[...] habiendo engendrado una de las partes de la Trinidad, se convierte necesariamente en un apéndice de ésta, en una cuarta figura que, sin transformar la tríada de la divinidad, exige una organización cuaternaria que funcione de manera simultánea y combinada con la anterior" (qtd. in Glantz 547). It appears that Mary serves a clear didactic function, making explicit and thus understandable the relationship each member of the Trinity has to each other through her. In the series written in 1686 she literally joins all three in one: "la que en tres rayos / Una misma Luz se da" (no. lii, 357). In another instance she is again the chosen one of the Father, Mother to the Son, and the "querida" of the Holy Spirit (no. lvii, 361). The centrality of Mary here expressed by Sor Juana does indeed beg

the question, is it not Divine Essence that unites the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? And if so, then is Sor Juana arguing that Mary is precisely that essence? It can't be completely denied it is possible she was; but the doubt remains given the radical heresy such an argument would represent and the desire to more logically conclude that Mary is more metaphor than essence itself. For Michelle González, Asst. Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Miami and former Theologian-in-residence at the San Lucas Tolimán Mission in Guatemala, Sor Juana's depictions of the Virgin Mary reaffirm beauty (reflected in her) as the primary attribute of God (69), but they ultimately participate in "a clear Christology" (63).

Almost more interesting however is that in these very *villancicos* Sor Juana represents the heteroglossia of her society; this relates directly to the stated argument that the manner of representation is important to determining Sor Juana's thoughts on the Virgin Mary, as there she was less restrained by social and political factors. A number of critics have studied the significance of Sor Juana's inclusion of these voices; Rosalva Loreto explains in a study of *La fiesta de la Concepción* in Puebla (1616-1636), that these public celebrations were symbolic representations of identity and effectively reproduced the cultural hegemony of the elite (Glantz 515). Octavio Paz underscores the social unity celebrations such as these offered colonial Mexico (312); but the fact that they occur in the *villancicos* dedicated to the Virgin in particular (no. 258, no. 311, no. xli, no. lviii) suggests that Sor Juana understood the Virgin Mary to be not only a mediator between the human and the divine, nor even a strong link between the three elements of the Trinity, but an umbrella under which all members of society could find commonality, if not community. As Jaroslav Pelikan notes: "[o]ne of the most profound and most persistent roles of the Virgin Mary in History has been her function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, and other religions" (67). Gonzalez claims as well that "as a performed theological genre, these poems constituted a poetic and musical form of public theology," one that argues for Mary's role in human redemption by means of her beauty and reflection of God's glory as the mother of Christ (61-63). But given Mexico's own "Indian Mary" –La Guadalupe, it seems especially significant that Sor Juana stresses a specifically intercultural role of the Virgin. Gonzalez admits that Sor Juana's inclusion of Indigenous and African elements in her works upholds the humanity of the dehumanized and oppressed, contributing as such to an inclusive theology of all human participation in salvation, echoing the work of Bartolomé de las Casas (85, 118-119). The politics of Sor Juana's non-white Virgin in a 1696 *villancico* is also clearly and openly resistant to white European theology mirrored in

the colonial clergy of New Spain, all of which lead Gonzalez to wonder if Sor Juana purposefully connects Mary to colonial issues centered on social justice (119-20).<sup>10</sup> Like Christ, Sor Juana's Mary is a liminal figure who inhabits both the human and divine worlds. But Mary is also like Sor Juana, herself a denizen of *nepantla*—the “between space” of the nahua, who due to her marginalization as a female in a male dominated world is obligated to engage in resistant strategies of survival.

Is Mary an “advocate for the marginalized” (Gonzalez 195), or a symbol of the primordial comfort and safety of the maternal matrix (Boss 213)? Surely she was and remains similarly today for many. Was the Virgin Mary equal to God in Sor Juana's eyes? I believe the answer is both yes and no. Certainly Mary offered Sor Juana the opportunity to prove her own religious devotion to those who seriously questioned it; she did this not only in the many poetic works she dedicated to the Virgin, but also in the 1694 *Profesión de votos* that accompanied her abandonment of “human studies” (Glantz 524-25). Perhaps Sor Juana privileged the Virgin because she intuited a similar argument Sarah Jane Boss makes over three hundred years later, that Mary is “an icon of freedom from domination, who not only inspires in the devotee the hope for a world transformed, but already embodies that transformation in her own life” (219).<sup>11</sup> Maria Warner opens *Alone of All Her Sex* with the assertion that Mary is the Church's model of Ideal Woman (xxiv); she is “the Woman above all others.” Sor Juana is too, in her own way; both served a purpose in the argument for education for females, an intellectual project undeniably of vital importance to Sor Juana (Merrim 229-31). We can understand the Virgin to be as much a rhetorical tool as she was an object of veneration for Sor Juana. And much like Mary is the “lady of paradoxes: Virgin but Mother, Human Mother but Mother of God” (Pelikan 51), there are contradictions within Sor Juana's work and thought as well. To dismiss them is to force upon her a false and unnecessary uniformity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Muriel's 1994 study illustrates the proliferation of female writers, though not always of the same caliber as Sor Juana.

<sup>2</sup>Merrim offers a thorough study of Sor Juana in the context of the seventeenth-century in comparison to other writing and thinking women of the period, who treated similar issues concerning women's place in society.

<sup>3</sup>For example, K. Mayers' article argues persuasively for Sor Juana's use of aesthetic form to make statements regarding colonialist discourse and *criollo* subjectivity.

<sup>4</sup>This point is mentioned by Sor Juana in the *Ejercicios devotos para los nueve días de la purísima Encarnación* as one of the "inefables favores" given to Mary by God ("mostrarle toda la creación del Universo" [848]). Jean Franco (52), Georgina Sabat de Rivers (1992, 951) and Josefina Muriel (223) all identify this as based on Sor María de Agreda's biography of the Virgin: *Mística ciudad de Dios*, in which Mary is said to have received "una participación inexplicable de los atributos de ciencia y sabiduría del mismo Dios" (70).

<sup>5</sup>Stephanie Merrim disrupts this equation when she argues that Isis, the goddess of Wisdom, serves as a mask for Sor Juana herself in *Neptuno alegórico* (232). Is then Sor Juana arguing that *she* is the goddess of Wisdom?

<sup>6</sup>In a recent book, M. Gonzalez proposes that Sor Juana presents in her works both a theology centered on the concepts of Beauty and Justice, and an argument that deems the aesthetic as "the most appropriate form" of its expression (193).

<sup>7</sup>See "Auto-Machia: The Self-Representations of Sor Juana and Anne Bradstreet" in Merrim for the connections between hagiography, self-abasement, and a subjectivity based on self-annihilation.

<sup>8</sup>See Bénassy-Berling (2000) for details regarding the scholarly activity resulting from this discovery.

<sup>9</sup>See Gonzalez, pages 78-79 and 108, for further discussion of this scene in *El Divino Narciso*.

<sup>10</sup>Benassy-Berling (1983), Jean Franco, and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (*Saberes Americanos*, 1999) all develop analyses of Sor Juana's *criolla* and colonial consciousness.

<sup>11</sup>Boss states that God, a non-individuated being, is beyond the dynamics of power that characterize human relationships and therefore could not have forced Mary to bear the Christ: "The fecundity of God's activity is thus not imposed on Mary, but springs up within and as part of her, so that her desire, her conception, her gestation and childbearing are radically her own at the same time as being divine" (218-19).

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