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Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz: Love vs. Patronage

Emil Volek
Arizona State University, Tempe

The life and works of the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695) have been at the forefront of Hispanic Baroque studies since the literary avant-garde movement, in the 1920s, revived the taste for the dense textures of Góngora's *culteranista* poetry. The traditional image of the nun-poetess, summed up by the Mexican *modernista* poet Amado Nervo in his remarkable biography *Juana de Asbaje* (1910), was to be challenged by the ardent Mexican secular anticlerical intellectuals, such as Ermilo Abreu Gómez, or the fledgling US feminist Dorothy Schons and their followers, and the challenge was answered in kind by the orthodox Catholics whom, of course, nobody believed.

Both sides have projected Sor Juana's life in neatly antithetical narratives: in one, her life full of frictions with the Church and a number of specific prelates (these then turn in the roles of "bad guys" according to critics' changing scenarios) ends in outright condemnation for her real or imaginary religious and/or intellectual trespassings (again, a growing range of most fanciful possibilities is offered), leading to her silencing, resignation if not downright suicide by too much charity; her routine ritual verbal self-flagellations, steeped deeply in Baroque imagination and discourse, are taken literally, sometimes with disarming *naïveté*, and additional offenses of the critics' own invention may be thrown into the mix (such as the innuendo of heresy). What's remarkable, and indeed almost to be expected, is how each new version of the alleged "ordeal" condenses the brew. Following the logic of "incremental growth" (Borges' notable addition to logic in his concept of "crecimiento lógico"), a suspicion or a conjecture that has started the expansive process ends in the certainty of specific offenses on which other critics pile up freely their new "discovered" crimes and punishments. The book perpetrated by the Mexican Nobel prize winning poet Octavio Paz (1982) is the high point in that tradition, although after teasing the reader with outlandish possibilities, he puts at the end a saving disclaimer "maybe it was not so."

In the other narrative, brotherly love dominates (as it should in the Church); conflicts are minimized if not erased, and the nun floats almost

harmoniously into exemplary sainthood with the acclaim of everybody around her, precisely of those who, in the other narrative, were accused of being the villains in the diverse slap-stick conspiracies with or against her (more in Volek 1998).

This schizophrenic image has been with us up to this day, in spite of all the effort of the esteemed philologist Antonio Alatorre (Alatorre and Tenorio 1998) and the orthodox defender Alejandro Soriano Vallès (1996, 2000) in deconstructing Paz (although their versions call for significant deconstruction in their turn). Yet, on balance, the side of the secularist modernizers of the nun has lost some ground in the last decades because of having so egregiously overstated their argument (culminating in the strange case of the noted Mexican historian of science Elías Trabulse, in 1995, who then dominated the string of anniversary conferences alleging that he had found the incriminatory documents of the complot, yet—under pressure to produce them—had to recognize that he had none to show for his claim, and shifted the blame on nondescript Catholic historians of the 19th century who have allegedly purloined the documents from where he has not found them: sounds convincing).

Since the main heated arguments rehashed in *sorjuanista* criticism have been turning around the Church relations and the end of Sor Juana's life, numerous key aspects of her life and work have been much less attended: some have been left to fantasy, and some basic questions have not even been asked. The problems extend from unsettled textual questions in the old and modern editions of her work; frequent reading and translating out of context (and even with scant familiarity with the 17th century Spanish), impacting the vision and import of different key episodes in her life (such as the changing relationship with the vice royal couples: note that I am stating "couples" and not only vicereines), to poor textual readings and subsequent equivocal initial interpretations that have become cemented as realities, and, finally, general problems extending to the specific endowments of the hegemonic "interpretive communities" (term of Stanley Fish), those of Mexico and the current US academy.

Here I will focus on one such episode, the relationship with the family of the second vicereine, the Countess of Paredes or Marquise of the Laguna, Maria Luisa. I will work around my recent book *La mujer que quiso ser amada por Dios* [The Woman who Wanted to be Loved by God, 2016] that takes up *one by one* those equivocal topics in the *sorjuanista* criticism that have

distorted our understanding of Sor Juana's life and work. Specifically, I will argue that what in the European context has been studied routinely under the rubric of "patronage," the enthusiastic *sorjuanista* crowd has preferred to view as romantic love at first sight and consummated almost instantaneously. And since we are dealing with alleged love between two women on top of it, we may be walking over a minefield.

Again, the logic of "incremental growth" has been at work here: the infusion of Freudianism in Western culture in the 20th century has produced a wink or a complicit smile yesterday and has become sure thing today. One of my most esteemed colleagues, perhaps joking unintentionally, says with straight face that the Sapphic legend is true because even the women selling *tortillas* at street-corners in Mexico City tell that Sor Juana was a lesbian, a postmodern authority anchored in the subaltern taken to the extreme.

Further, the unquestioned assumption of "romantic love at first sight" has produced what in psychology has been called "anchoring effect" (Kahneman 2011), creating a "bubble" of expectations and a horizon of verisimilitude that have shaped our sense of timing of events and the very reading of documents, inducing sometimes blatant errors. Here we will disagree with Nietzsche: presumptive "interpretations" must be checked against facts, as far as these can be established. The old-fashioned historical archive, close reading of the texts within personal and historical contexts, and new discoveries will be our guides.

So, what happened? Let's go over what we *know*.

After some confusion earlier, the Robles diary (1: 282ss) informs us that the news came to New Spain, in July of 1680, that a new viceroy would be coming and who he would be: the Marquis of the Laguna, from one of the most prominent Spanish aristocratic families. In September he and his wife have arrived to the port of Veracruz. After about a month of uncomfortable yet leisurely travel on lousy roads, they arrived to the capital. The Marquis took possession of his office on November 7 and the couple made their official "entry" into the city on November 30. It was a widely expected and festive moment, full of pageantry, and the celebrations continued unabated for about a month or two (since the Colony, Latin America has been a "clientelist" society: it has been important, then as now, to be on good terms with the powers to be; to show enthusiastic welcome to the new administration has been of paramount importance for individuals,

city representatives, religious corporations and professional organizations, as well as convents, all would sooner or later need something).

The viceroys were a relatively young, vivacious, and outgoing couple: he was born on December 24, 1638, and his wife on October 24, 1649; they were married in 1675, but did not have good luck with heirs: a daughter died almost at birth in December the following year and a son was born in August 1678 but died before his first birthday. Probably they were sent to the New World to change air. Maria Luisa got pregnant in 1681, but the kid was stillborn in April next year. We can imagine how tense the expectations were when she soon got pregnant again, and finally gave live birth to a son, baptized José (called “the Mexican”), on July 5, 1683. Will he live? All the community trembled and prayed for his health.

And even the Earth trembled indeed. Precisely when the couple was closing on Mexico City, an impressive comet appeared on the sky and dominated the nights through December. Everybody was frightened. Sigüenza y Góngora (who failed miserably with his arch, Creole patriot as he was, because he put in his creation the images of all the Aztec *tlatoanis* to impress on the Marquis that he was continuing a historical line of local government; in vain because the Spanish aristocrat had no clue) decided to seize the moment and wrote an erudite pamphlet explaining to the terrified vicereine that comets were condensations of diverse emanations coming from the Earth and burned ecologically up high in the air, therefore were not messengers of god. But the issue was not settled so easily and even got complicated: in May 1681, an erudite missionary, father Kino, arrived, who observed the comet in Seville, and since people still worried about its meaning, he also wrote a pamphlet, dedicated to the viceroy, explaining that comets were supralunar phenomena, sign of aging universe (gosh!, the world was about four thousand years plus seven days old, counting all generations from the Creation!) and did not bore any specific message to the Earth. The news that the universe was falling apart but the Earth was OK probably did not help to convince anybody. But Kino undercut Sigüenza, who was not happy since he tried hard to impress the newcomer from Europe by his science. To add insult to injury, Sor Juana who had just made his friendship, wrote a sonnet praising Kino (sonnet 205; more in my book). While people kept discussing the comet, a new year came, and, against all scientific “evidence,” all hell broke loose: between March and July, waves of earthquakes chastised the city, the earth opened at many places and

swallowed what happened to be standing there, so people could see the hell claiming them. It is quite probable that all this stress contributed to the miscarriage of the vicereine in April 1682.

Why do I dwell on these nonliterary “domestic” or long forgotten “scientific” details? Because all will bring something to my account.

The Marquis will end his assignment in the New World at the end of 1686, will go successfully through the judicial review by January 1687; but the family will stay in Mexico for another year and half. We can only surmise that it would be because of the little son, since the main mortality among children was then between birth and four years, and the unpredictable sea crossing was a strenuous venture even for the strongest. In July of 1687, the proud mother writes to her father about the youngster, the “Chepito,” being healthy and loved by the Creole community, and informs him about the upcoming return of the family to Spain next year (*Cartas de Lysi*, found recently at Tulane; Calvo and Colombi 181–82). Shortly after their return, the vice royal couple will be elevated to the rank of *grandes*, the top echelon of Spanish aristocracy.

Let’s now take up the story from another angle.

When the news of which viceroy is coming has reached the city, in July, at the behest of the Archbishop Don Payo, great admirer of young Sor Juana, the city council decides to put the task of preparing one of the triumphal arches for the official entry of the Marquis to her. Hers was the arch before the entrance to the Cathedral; the other one that was put up in front of the headquarters of the Inquisition, where the Marquis received the keys to the city, was entrusted to the young Creole hothead Sigüenza y Góngora. All in all, it seemed to be a wager on the young generation. They, well, *she* succeeded beyond wild expectations.

To design a successful triumphal arch and what went with it was a daunting proposition, although a lot of staple topics, emblems and so on would be readily available. The question was about the ingenuity to assemble all this stuff into something apparently new and enjoyable. Sor Juana was also expected to deliver a poignant, practical message that the Cathedral was in need of repairs and of completing. Another hurdle was that her project had to fill the diverse available spaces already built in the wooden frame, altogether fourteen, that fit the structure of the entrance to the Cathedral. The frame was used at diverse Church festivals, only this occasion was special.

The Marquis of *the Laguna*, of the lagoon, was coming to the lagoon on which Mexico City was built as a mythical Neptune to take possession of his watery kingdom: once the basic generative metaphor for the arch was born, Sor Juana did not stop. In September she handed over the instructions to the artisans. Beyond that, she needed to write a rhymed description of and a rationale for each image, a poem that would be printed, distributed, and read before the select audience; and then to pen a still longer festive prose explanation that would be printed shortly after the event as a commemorative booklet.

Sor Juana's was a total success. The arch, the poem, and the booklet, entitled *Neptuno alegórico* [Allegorical Neptune] was an unending feast of wit, a masterpiece of flattery, and some old-fashioned politicking about the needs of the Cathedral. Finally, turning lagoon into *mar* (sea)—the logic of “incremental growth” works marvels in the Baroque, too—Sor Juana, surprisingly, puts a feminine touch to the celebration of the viceroy and dedicates the last two *lienzos* to the most erudite praise of his consort Maria Luisa.

The vice royal couple was enchanted and intrigued (not so much with Sigüenzas' piece, but that's another story), and decided to visit the charming author when their schedule permitted. We can presume that it happened sometime in Spring 1681.

Since that moment, things began rolling. Or not so fast?

A well-educated couple of Spanish high aristocracy met a congenial woman of similar age, although from a totally different background (let's keep in mind the unforgiving etiquette of the Spanish court; yet the arch and the expected miracles of the New World may have had a relaxing effect, like in other spheres in life, such as in the Creole convents). More visits followed of one or the other or both of the vice royal couple, and slowly a bond began to be formed. Poems, messages and gifts followed visits. The *romance* 16 comes with “Advertencia,” a kind of “announcement” or “warning” that the poem was written perhaps in recognition of favors received, or of Marquise's good nature and looks, or the secret influence of humors and stars that is called sympathy, or everything above. Octavio Paz wasted the whole chapter of his book venturing into the hermetic and other occult currents of the Renaissance dealing with mysteries of the “soul,” without realizing that the “secret influence of stars” meant perhaps more simply that the two women were surprised to find out that they were both Scorpios.

Why did Paz not get it? Perhaps as a modern secular intellectual he did not read his horoscope. But we also have to step back to the Mexican context: Mexican secular intelligentsia (although many coming from religious schools) was extremely anti-Catholic, which led to several episodes inciting or bordering on civil war (in the 1920s it was the “cristero” uprising, so well camouflaged by “progressive” intelligentsia in the country as part of the Revolution that had ended happily back in 1917). For them, all Catholics were hypocrites, liars, always in need to cover up something. So, everything that the original necessarily Catholic sources said about Sor Juana’s life was suspect, and still is.

Father Calleja, Sor Juana’s first biographer, states that she was born on Friday November 12, 1651. But November 12 fell that year on Sunday. The good father made a mistake at reconstructing the day, and also in his count of years, months, hours and minutes of her life with which he sought to impress his readers. Due to his failed mathematics, the gates were open to all kinds of conjectures and fantasies that were finding strong appeal (for example, shifting her birth to 1648, to May, and so on, at will). Once you do not believe your sources, you may miss stuff.

The “love at first sight” assumption had other consequences: it compressed time. The famous “Carta de Monterrey,” found in 1980 in that city by father Aureliano Tapia, mentions two years of criticism by her confessor Núñez de Miranda for her “mundane” dealings with the viceroys, improper for a nun that should be dead for the world. In order to accommodate the “two years,” the critics, surprisingly, start their count with the arch (which would seem unassailable since the Archbishop himself made her do it; plus the arch came at the very end of 1680; the same shenanigans with mathematics would occur with the counting of her “two last” years of her life: my chapter reads like satire, but so be it (Volek, *La mujer* 194–217). Counting in the arch year, they situate the letter at the end of 1681, or early 82, and the blow-out with Núñez, allegedly enabled by the strong support of Sor Juana by the viceroys, shortly after in the same year.

Antonio Alatorre has noticed that in the romance 33, written to the vicereine for some Christmas, Sor Juana complains defiantly that she has been harassed because of the friendship and has been prohibited to write them. It had to be the strict if not nefarious Núñez. Having the mentioned time-compression in his head, Alatorre situates the poem at the Christmas of 1681. Had he flipped the page of the Porrúa edition of her *Obras completas*, a

handy edition in one volume instead of the four canonical by Fondo de Cultura Económica (one can even determine with what book the renowned philologist worked!), he would find that the poem continues and that at the very end of the poem the “bellísimo José” is mentioned; and José, as we remember, was born in 1683. So, the break with Núñez must have come sometime in 1684, after the frustrated confessor learnt that the lamb in his spiritual care sinned again. The break with Núñez was then a much more protracted struggle, even with herself, because the nun was breaking her oath of obedience to her spiritual caretaker.

This reset shows, in its turn, the “Carta” in a different light, because of what Sor Juana tells that she is doing and what she does not tell about her secular activities. A detailed reinterpretation of the letter would be very instructive, because her and our perspectives and expectations may clash (what was her attitude to her secular writings, how important was it for *her*?); but it would take us away from our point here.

This new timing of events is sustained by the letter, recently discovered in Tulane’s holdings (published in 2015), written in December of 1682 by the vicereine to her cousin, the Duchesse of Aveiro. After going through the family gossip and complaints about solitude and dull ambience in the Colony, she mentions her occasional visits of a “rare woman” in the convent of the Hieronymites, a real wonder who impresses everybody by her genius, who had lived in a shanty village among Indians and knows much about all kinds of sciences that she had studied somewhat haphazardly. And suggests that the Duchesse, of whom they talk a lot when they meet, would be delighted to know her (Calvo and Colombi 177–78).

One feels the wonderment about and also a distance from this New World “monster,” at the end of 1682! Probably sometime after that Sor Juana will write to the Duchesse her famous “americanista” poem (*romance* 37).

All these tidbits of information offer a new and strikingly different perspective on the emerging “friendship.” Further, it is not only a friendship between the two women, because the man is always there: when Sor Juana writes to the Marquise, she always sends a message to him; and when she writes to him, she always mentions his beautiful wife. Her writing to them is an exquisite balance of coquetry, a poetic *ménage à trois*. Besides that, as already said, the Marquis himself also makes his calls to see her. However, as shown in my reconstruction in the book, it takes more time for her poems to show more playful familiarity with him.

While the *sorjuanista* criticism tends to read these poems (especially those directed to the Marquise) as some personal and even clandestine messages and declarations of love (taking Baroque rhetoric literally is always dangerous for the reader), they were actually written for special occasions as *open letters*: to be read and admired in public to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries and religious holidays. No wonder that admiration, friendship and patronage blend intimately together. The “favors received” are mentioned in the “warning” of the *romance* 16; or in the *romance* 45, directed to “My illustrious Maecenas,” that does not name the Marquis by name, but he is easily identifiable by the clues disseminated in the poem (only his scrupulous editor Méndez Plancarte gets confused; MP 1:427). Since the birthdays of the couple are close together (she October 24 and him December 24), Sor Juana had plenty of time to think how she would surprise them each time. In my reconstruction of those years, she would choose the same poetic form to write to both of them in a certain year. It was another fine point in her relationship and her mastery of poetry and of public relations with the vice royal couple.

Then the son comes into play. Actually, my reconstruction shows that the relationship reached a new higher level precisely around the boy’s birth, in 1683, and around the worries about his health in the first years of his life. The gain in depth was followed by growing familiarity and even jest. Sor Juana loved pranks.

In all editions of Sor Juana’s work these poems are published in haphazard order and are dispersed under different poetic forms or headings. At best we are told that the poem was written between 1680 and 1686; this does not say anything, of course, and even this nothing may be wrong because the Marquises stayed in Mexico until Spring of 1688, and Sor Juana sent some poems to them by boat long afterwards. However, what was not published was lost, and what was lost was taken as the silence imposed on the nun in punishment.

In my book I have attempted to reconstruct the timeline of the main pieces dedicated to the Marquises, year by year, using all kinds of information, from the forms of address (Vos, Señora; tú, Filis; tú, María), to any little thematic or contextual indications or correlations I could find in them, as well as in the personal and societal context. It is a fine balancing act. I would not dare to claim absolute success, but even an attempt, a sign that some such thing is possible, offers striking new insights.

A different picture, that of a slowly unfolding friendship with the vice royal couple and of its many faces, has emerged in this way. So, for example, one of the finest poems dedicated to the Marquise, the famous *romance* 19, “Lo atrevido de un pincel” (The daring of the painter’s brush), is not only Sor Juana’s verbal portrait of “Filis” (an interesting return to an intimate distance by using that poetic name), portrait that some have tried to over-read sexually. In my reconstruction the poem corresponds to the last birthday the Marquise spent in Mexico, in 1687, knowing that the family would return to Spain shortly: from there comes perhaps the noticeable hint of nostalgia, creating the exquisite homage and the sense of farewell, but also offering a key *metapoematic passage* indicating how the goddess Marquise is to be celebrated in a strictly and purely spiritual way (in contrast to the vulgar beauties), with which then the human impulse of the poetess struggles, in the same way as later in her religious *romances* 56-58 that deal with her fleeting mystical experiences once she decided to seek sainthood.

The care, the friendship and the patronage of the Marquises regarding the nun has not ended when they left Mexico. But their great plans with the nun at the Spanish court were thwarted when the Marquis, now one of the *grandes*, died suddenly in April of 1692. Fortunately, by that time, they managed to publish the two volumes of her work: *Inundación castálida*, a book mainly of diverse pieces of poetry, celebratory allegorical playlets (*loas*), festive strings of Christmas carols (*villancicos*), that concludes with the *Neptuno alegórico*; and, a bit later, a second volume of prose, poetry and major theater, both religious and secular, published in 1689 and 1692, respectively; both volumes were then republished regularly with great success into the mid-1720s, hiding more secrets in their turn (some texts were reshuffled, new were added as the ships were bringing them to Spain, and some textual changes in certain editions suggest that it was only Sor Juana who could intervene in making them).

Then death and history intervened: the Marquis died and Sor Juana died; then, in the “War of Succession” (1700–1715), the Marquise backed the losing Austrian side; her property was confiscated and she and her son went into exile. The knowledge about the making of the first editions was lost. Sor Juana’s legacy was exposed to the mercy of the market, changing literary tastes and other mundane interests.

When we look at *Inundación castálida*, it cannot escape us that it is a pretty self-serving book on the part of the Marquises: dedicated to Maria

Luisa on the cover; in the introductory sonnet, Sor Juana declares herself a slave and a servant of her; if we discount the few *loas* celebrating the king and the queen, and the Christmas *villancicos*, about fifty percent of materials deal with the family of the Marquises; and the magnificent *Neptuno* closes the deal. The Marquises watched over the edition and defrayed the costs; they brought to Spain in her works an admired “monster” from the New World, who celebrates them in turn with wit and charm. But it was also a break-through for the obscure Mexican nun into the fame and glory in the Old World. It would seem that both the patronage and the friendship came out of this well served. Not so the *sorjuanista* criticism.

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