

CLARINDA'S CATALOGUE OF WORTHY WOMEN IN HER *DISCURSO EN LOOR DE LA POESÍA* (1608)

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One of the most singular literary contributions from colonial Peru is the *Discurso en loor de la poesía*, by Clarinda, an anonymous poet whose identity has evaded literary scholars and historians.¹ Published in the prologue to *Primera parte del Parnaso Antártico de obras amatorias* (Seville, 1608), a translation of Ovid's *Heroides* by Diego Mexía de Fernangil (?- 1618?), a Spanish poet who lived in the viceroyalties of Mexico and Peru for many years,² the *Discurso* shows how Peninsular poetic predilections quickly traveled to the Spanish Indies. Taking into account these poetic traditions and particularly the influence of the Italian school in Spain (Rivers), in this study I will point out how the *Discurso en loor de la poesía*³ embraces and expands these practices to create a lyrical voice that is both female and American. I further contend that the *Discurso* dares to propose a Peruvian intellectual space where its feminine voice could interact with others of different origin and gender.

The Feminine Lyrical Voice

It is worth remembering that the *Discurso* appears in the prologue of a Spanish translation of Ovid's *Heroides*, a collection of letters written, in most cases, by famous women to their husbands and lovers. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in the *Discurso* the lyrical voice is depicted as that of a woman in at least two ways: directly, by alluding to its gender, and indirectly, through the inclusion of women in a catalogue of savants and writers from various traditions and historical periods. The lyrical subject states her gender in at least five instances (219, 221, 228, 235, 236). She wonders, for example, "cómo una mujer" dares to praise Saint Paulinus's and Juvenco's poetry (228).⁴ In a posture of false humility, the poetic voice also describes herself as "mujer indocta" but able to distinguish between "palabras metafóricas" and "alegóricas" (248). That is to say, despite her lack of formal education, she is able to differentiate among the various elements of poetic language.

Following literary conventions of the period, the lyrical voice appears to belittle her gender when explaining that arrogance is "bien vana"

when the praises are offered by a woman (243). Among the various characterizations of the poetic subject it is worthwhile mentioning one in which she addresses the muses while emphasizing the topic of feminine weakness: "A una mujer que teme en ver la orilla / d'un arroyuelo de cristales bellos, /quieres q[ue] rompa el mar co[n] su barquilla?" (240). Through these allusions the lyrical subject affirms her womanhood and hints at the risks she is taking when engaging in intellectual pursuits.

The Catalogue of Worthy Women

Precisely with the intention of praising women and underscoring their capacity to take on different challenges, the *Discurso* includes several women in a catalogue of poets and savants taken from different sources (classical tradition, Biblical history, early Christianity). When introducing the catalogue, the lyrical voice reasserts her gender: "Mas será bien, pues soi muger, que d'ellas / diga mi Musa, si el benino cielo / quiso con tanto bien engrandecellas" (236).

As the poetic voice indicates, the catalogue in the *Discurso* includes both heroes and heroines. However, the inclusion of these exemplary figures, be they men or women, was no novelty. The catalogue of worthy females was popularized in the Renaissance by Boccaccio who in his *De claris mulieribus* (*Of Illustrious Women*, 1361) included the biographies of 104 heroines taken mainly from antiquity. In Spain, various writers attempted to follow in the footsteps of Boccaccio and wrote about the life of illustrious women chosen from Biblical history, the classical world, and contemporary hagiographies.

Among them are the Franciscan Juan Rodríguez del Padrón (or De la Cámara) (?-c.1450)⁵ with his *Triunfo de las donas*, a long poem in praise of women, and don Alvaro de Luna (1388?-1453), the powerful adviser to King Juan II of Castile, with his book *Libro de las virtuosas e claras mujeres* (1446). In contrast to Boccaccio, Luna's catalogue included Biblical characters as well as female saints about whose lives and deeds he had read in the *Flos sanctorum*. Initially these compendia formed part of the ancient debate about the good or evil nature of women but increasingly addressed the issues of their intellectual capacity and social position. On the one hand, there were those who defended the right of women to be educated and to govern; on the other, there were those who, following Aristotle's ideas, perceived women as passive and inferior beings whose insatiable lust had to be controlled by men —fathers, husbands, brothers.⁶ Both tendencies, the apologetic and the misogynistic, coexisted and were represented in the literature and visual arts of the early modern period. Boccaccio himself is the author of *Il Corbaccio*, an influential tract pointing out women's many faults.

In Spain, the most popular book during the 16th and 17th centuries,



(Illus. 1)

Cárcel de amor (1492), by Diego de San Pedro,⁷ includes an attack on women, as well as an apology wherein Leriano, the protagonist, defends women through fifteen propositions.⁸ His arguments closely follow the *Tratado en defensa de virtuossas mugeres* (c.1443) by the Castilian author Diego de Valera, who, particularly in his notes, emulates Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*. That the interest on the topic persisted is proven by the fact that almost a century later in the Viceroyalty of Peru, Diego Dávalos y Figueroa,⁹ a Spanish soldier working and writing first in Alto Perú and

later living in La Paz, wrote and published *Defensa de damas* (1603).¹⁰ In the six cantos in *ottava rima* of this poem the author contradicts those who viewed women as weak creatures on account of various defects (among others, their treachery, loquaciousness, fickleness, pretentiousness, cowardice and assertiveness). Surely Clarinda was acquainted with this work and also with Dávalos's *Miscelánea Austral* (1603), a tract written in dialogue format in which he defends women and also includes a number of poems in the style of Petrarch. In the *Discurso* Clarinda praises Dávalos y Figueroa and calls him "[h]onor, de la Poesía Castellana" (243).

Renaissance paintings and engravings populated with heroines such as Deborah, Judith, Cleopatra and Lucretia (illus. 1) lent their support to those who defended women's rights. Others, influenced by misogynistic



(Illus. 2)

ideas, made fun of women in grotesque representations (illus. 2). Curiously, as the polemic progressed, these female figures became more masculine in appearance and were transformed into "mujeres varoniles" and had their literary counterparts in Spanish Golden Age drama (Garrard 144-45).¹¹ Painters of this period took part in these debates. Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), for example, portrayed traditional heroines in a more realistic fashion with regard to their dress and display of emotion. Gentileschi's pictorial arrangements also helped to delineate her ideas about the character of the women she painted (Garrard 144-47).¹²

It is pertinent to point out that in Spain the long controversy about the social position and intellectual capacity of women often moved within the parameters of matrimonial subjugation. Thus, the most cherished virtues of the exemplary wife were chastity, fidelity and obedience. Even when admired humanists such as Juan Luis Vives supported the education of women, the recommended training privileged traditional models of female conduct. Thus, in his *Instrucción de la mujer cristiana* (1523), the Valencian writer established many limitations to the education of women:¹³

El tiempo que ha de estudiar la mujer yo no lo determino más en ella que en el hombre, sino que en el varón quiero que haya conocimiento de más cosas y más diversas, así para su provecho dél como para bien y utilidad de la república y para enseñar a los otros. Pero la mujer debe estar puesta en aquella parte de doctrina que la enseña virtuosamente vivir y pone[r] orden en sus costumbres y crianza y bondad de su vida. (26-27)

Revealing her knowledge of this old debate as well as of the literary tradition that informs it, Clarinda, the as yet unidentified poet from the viceroyalty of Peru, includes heroines from Biblical history (Jael, Judith, the Virgin Mary) as well as women authors from the pagan-Christian tradition (Sappho, Damophila, Pola Argentaria, Proba Valeria, Tiresias Manto, the Sibyls and Elpis) in her catalogue of famous women. It is important to review the identity and deeds of these personalities in order to understand how Clarinda's compendium contributes to the depiction of an exceptional female lyrical voice.

Personalities from Biblical History

The Virgin Mary.¹⁴ As is customary, the Virgin opens the list of worthy women. However, in contrast to traditional catalogues that praise her for her sanctity and role as the mother of God, the Peruvian poem presents the Virgin as a poet: "no compuso aquel canto qu'enternesce/ al corazón más duro i ostinado?" (227).¹⁵

Deborah and Jael (225). The campaign by the Israelites against Jabin, the king of Canaan, was spearheaded by two women: Deborah and Jael. The former unified and encouraged the Israelites to fight against their oppressor, King Jabin of Canaan; the latter killed Sisara, the powerful general of King Jabin's army. In fact, Jael first welcomes the general into her tent and later, while he sleeps, she kills him by hammering a nail into his forehead. Both women dared to challenge the system: Deborah as a leader and judge of the Israelites appropriates roles traditionally reserved for men; Jael forgets the rules of hospitality among desert people and

kills Sisara in her own tent. By so doing, she supplants Barac, the Israelite general fighting against the people of Canaan, and deprives him of his triumph.

Judith. A beautiful and pious widow from the city of Bethulia, Judith prepared a secret plan to save her native city from the siege of Holofernes, an Assyrian general in the army of King Nebuchadnezzar. Dressed in her best garments and accompanied by a female servant, she went to the enemy camp and had the soldiers bring her to their general. Charmed by her beauty, Holofernes welcomes her and invites her to dinner. On account of dietary restrictions, Judith was allowed to prepare her own food that she carried in a bag. Later, the drunk Holofernes attempted to rape her; Judith resisted, cut off his head, and placed it in the bag she used to carry her provisions. The valiant and virtuous widow thus saved her people from war and destruction. According to Clarinda, "Al cielo empíreo [Judith] aquella voz levanta, / i dando a Dios loor por la vitoria, / eroicos, i sagrados versos canta" (226).

Pagan and Christian Women

Among the women of antiquity cited in the *Discurso* are Sappho, the much admired poet from the island of Lesbos whom Plato called the "Tenth Muse;" Damophila (from 6 B.C.), a poet of Sappho's circle who wrote hymns in honor of the goddess Artemisa and also erotic poetry; Pola Argentaria, the wife of Lucano (39-65 A.D.) who is believed to have completed her husband's epic poem, *Pharsalia* (*Belli Civilis Libri*), after the author died in Cordoba; Proba Valeria, a pagan poet later converted to Christianity; the Sibyls,¹⁶ famous Greek soothsayers who used verse to divulge their prophecies to the people; Tiresias Manto, a famous fortune-teller who, according to mythology, changed his/her sex seven times and also revealed his prophecies through verse; Elpis, the wife of Boethius, the famous philosopher and the author of sacred hymns dedicated to the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul later sung in Catholic liturgy.

The poetic voice ends the catalogue by praising contemporary Italian women poets.¹⁷ After this tribute, the lyric voice returns to America ending her list with a revealing conclusion, "i aun yo conozco en el Pirú tres damas, / qu'an dado en la Poesía eroicas muestras" (238). It is worth remembering that the return to the contemporary scene was a customary way of concluding these catalogues. Boccaccio ends his *De claris mulieribus* by praising Joanna, queen of Sicily and Jerusalem, and rumored to be a former lover of his.

An Opening for Women Writers

After examining Clarinda's catalogue it is possible to conclude that the personalities from Biblical history (Deborah, Jael, Judith, the Virgin Mary) are noteworthy for their extraordinary deeds as well as for their ability to inspire or produce poetry. Women from antiquity and early Christianity are linked to prophecies expressed in verse forms, as is the case of the Sibyls and Tiresias Manto, or are praised for their contributions to poetry—Sappho, Damophila, Pola Argentaria, Elpis. A review of the first group of women from antiquity and early Christianity shows how divine will expressed itself through prophecies recited in verse form by chosen women; an examination of the second group underscores the capacity of women to produce sacred, epic and lyric poetry, the most admired literary modalities during the Renaissance.

Consistent with tradition, the *Discurso* takes advantage of the list of heroines to show exemplary women from several periods and areas. Some of the personalities cited have changed the course of history and inspired poets; others are presented as being as intellectually gifted as men, selected by the gods to reveal their designs, or to write poetry. All, including Clarinda and the three women poets from Peru she mentions, are worthy of praise and imitation. Thus, the heroines included in the catalogue are very distant from the apparent "weakness of women" announced earlier by the lyric voice.¹⁸ Precisely by contrasting these two well known literary formulas depicting women as strong or vulnerable, the lyric voice shows her command of poetic tradition. However, by underscoring the achievements of these exemplary women the poetic voice does away with the derogatory image proposed by the old topic. But what is even more important, through this counterpoint the female lyric subject succeeds in depicting herself as a sophisticated and well informed voice, able to carve an intellectual space for herself and other women in Peruvian poetic circles.

The New Home for Apollo and the Nymphs

The appropriation of traditional poetic formulations in the *Discurso* reaffirms the cultural connection between the poets from Europe and America as well as the possibility of transforming established practices by the Peruvian poets. In this regard, it is important to stress the unique identity of the lyric subject in the *Discurso*: a woman speaking from the New World with the audacity to propose that Poetry has found a new home in America:

Que como dio el Dios Marte con sus manos
al Español su espada, porque él solo
fuesse espanto, i orror de los Paganos:

Assí también el soberano Apolo
 le dio su pluma, para que bolara
 d'el exe antiguo a nuestro nuevo Polo. (238)

Bringing to the fore the well known topic of the dispute of arms and letters, the poetic voice explains that if Mars, the god of war, gave the Spaniards his sword to fight the pagans, now Apollo, the god of poetry, is giving them his pen to bring it to the Antarctic region. Thus the lyric voice records Poetry's move to America. But it is equally important to note how this change renews the traditional formula by pointing to the Viceroyalty of Peru, a new land, as an ideal place for intellectual pursuits. In this unexplored frontier there will be room for diverse subjects —Europeans and Americans, men and women, Indians and mestizos— to speak and interact. For this intellectual enterprise to succeed, the lyric voice summons the "Ninfas d'el Sur" and asks for their help. If poetry has now relocated to the "nuevo Polo," the "Antarctic" nymphs are its noble attendants.¹⁹

The engraving from the inside cover of the first part of the *Parnaso Antártico* (illus. 3) summarizes the ideas presented by Clarinda. The topic of the dispute of arms and letters is repeated in the larger band that encloses the sun, a mountain [Parnassus], a smaller band with the motto "plus vltra" [an allusion to the Castilian coat of arms], and a fountain [Castalia].²⁰ This band explains: "Si Marte llevó al ocaso las dos columnas[,] Apolo llevó al Antártico Polo a las musas y al Parnaso." The "plus vltra" of the smaller band and the two columns alluded to in the larger one, point to the coat of arms of Castille and to the tasks of Hercules. It can also be said that they point to the lands conquered by the Spaniards beyond the place in the southern part of the Peninsula where, according to mythology, the son of Zeus placed the two columns. Now, under the protection of the Sun, a symbol of the Inca empire and of Peru in the iconography of the period,²¹ Mount Parnassus, sacred to Apollo and inhabited by the muses, as well as the fountain Castalia whose waters inspired the poets, relocate to Peru —to the Antarctic region—, the admirable home of the southern nymphs and now of Poetry itself. As did the ancient poets, those from the Southern or Antarctic region will drink and be inspired by the waters of Castalia; however, the streams and rivers that now nurture the mythical fountain are different as will be the verses composed by the Peruvian poets.

Taking advantage of various manifestations of the European lyrical tradition —the topics of false humility, the weakness of women and the dispute of arms and letters, the popular geography of Parnassus, and the catalogue of worthy females— but at the same time assuming the singularity of the new geographical and intellectual space (the Southern or "Antarctic" region), the lyric voice of the *Discurso en loor de la poesía* is introduced as an *other* with several characteristics —an intelligent woman,



(Illus. 3)

a resident of Peru, a colonial subject. Authorized by tradition and renewed by the awareness of her "otherness," her poetry will rival the best of Europe.

Notes

¹Another important woman poet of the period is Amarilis, the author of "Epístola a Belardo" (c. 1619), addressed to Lope de Vega and published in 1621 in *La Filomena*, a miscellaneous collection, by the Spanish playwright. In a recent book Lohmann Villena has suggested that Amarilis is María de Rojas y Garay, a prominent lady from Huanuco (see his *Amarilis Indiana*).

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²The first translation of this work into Spanish was done by Juan Rodríguez del Padrón with the title of *Bursario*. See the edition of Pilar Saquero Suárez-Somonta and Tomás González Rolán. My thanks to Ottavio Di Camillo for this reference.

³I quote from the edition prepared by Antonio Cornejo Polar. The page references are indicated in parentheses; accents have been added.

⁴The former protested against the pagan muses; the latter is one of the first Christian epic poets.

⁵He is the author of one of the first Spanish sentimental novels, *El siervo libre de amor*. See the edition by César Hernández Alonso.

⁶For a review of these positions in Spanish literature, see Ornstein.

⁷The novel had 25 editions during the 16th and 17th centuries, and was translated into other European languages, including English.

⁸It is worth noting that in the French tradition Christine de Pizan (c. 1365-c.1430), in her *Le livre de la cité des dammes* (1405), defended the biological and intellectual equality of males and females.

⁹He also wrote *Miscelánea Austral* (1603), a tract in prose and verse on which, following the popular dialogue format, two characters, Delio and Cilena, discuss the importance of poetry and other related topics. For an analysis of this work, see Colombí-Monguió.

¹⁰I have consulted the original 1603 edition at The Hispanic Society of America.

¹¹On this topic see also, Carmen Bravo-Villasante and McKendrick.

¹²Garrard's observations about Gentileschi's depictions of Judith beheading Holofernes are particularly useful.

¹³Vives's ideas about the negative impact on female readers and listeners of the

"libros vanos," that is to say novels of chivalry, are well known. See chapter five of his *Instrucción*.

¹⁴It is pertinent to recall that in the *Panegyrico por la poesía* (1627) attributed to the Spanish poet Fernando de Vera y Mendoza, the Virgin Mary appears as a poet (Rivers, "Apuntes" 276-77).

¹⁵Probably a reference to the Magnificat, the song of the Virgin Mary beginning *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* [my soul doth magnify the Lord], in Luke 1.46-55.

¹⁶In the second book, chapter 76 of his book praising women, Alvaro de Luna celebrates Rutea, one of the sibyls.

¹⁷"Pues que diré d'Italia, que adornada / [h]oy día se nos muestra con matronas, / qu'en esto eceden a la edad pasada / Tu o[h] Fama en muchos libros las pregonas / sus rimas cantas, su esple[n]dor demuestras, / i assí de Lauro eterno las coronas" (238).

¹⁸It is worth remembering the following verses: "Mas en que mar mi débil voz se hunde? / a quién invoco? qué deidades llamo? / qué vanidad, qué niebla me confunde? (220); or "Bien sé qu'en intentar esta hazaña / pongo un monte, mayor qu'Étna el no[m]brado / en [h]ombros de mujer que son d'araña" (221).

¹⁹The importance of the Antarctic origin of the nymphs was already acknowledged by Alicia de Colombí-Monguió: "Si la Cirene del primer verso, y tantísimas otras deidades al uso no son más que simples trasplantes al espacio sin espacio de la mitología clásica, en estos tercetos la Anónima se empeña en localizar puntualmente su sudamericanismo" ("Carta de ciudadanía" 95).

²⁰Barrera already pointed out how Mexía combined the traditional topics of "sapientia" and "fortitudo" (9).

²¹The native historian Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala in his *Primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615) called the Indies "tierra en el día." As David Brading has noted, by extension this can be interpreted as land of the sun, one of the principal deities of the Inca pantheon (153). Thus, "tierra en el día," or of the sun, first referred to the Inca empire and later to colonial Peru.

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Illustrations

- Illus. 1. Biblical heroines among which is Jael. Engraving by Hans Burghmair, c. 1519 (in Garrard 142).
- Illus. 2. Grotesque representation of women from classical antiquity. Engraving by Gaspar Isaac, 17th century (in Garrard 144).
- Illus. 3. Cover of the first part of *Parnaso Antártico de obras amatorias* (in Barrera).

