

# THE EARLY MODERN SONNET'S LESSONS OF PETRARCHISM AND MILITARISM

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If a historian's reflections on the rhetoric of poetry from the sixteenth century are any indication, scholars from parallel fields looking clearly view the genre of the sonnet as a vehicle for Spain's imperial ambitions. Geoffrey Parker remarks that traditionally anthologized lyrics like Hernando Acuña's "Soneto al rey nuestro señor" along with the, "verses of Spain's other soldier-poets[,] such as Francisco de Aldana, Alonso de Ercilla and Fernando de Herrera, ... displayed a self-intoxicating rhetoric which called for Spain to conquer the world" (102). From within the field of early modern literature we are familiar with how studies of the courtly sonnet tradition have changed. The legacy of the Petrarchan sonnet was once central to poetry's elevated status in the values promoted by New Criticism. But these formal hierarchies are now antiquated, having served the interests of only a small group of readers. Later generations of critics identified the sonnet as a key literary tool for reinforcing the subject position of the ruling classes. When John Beverley quotes Roland Greene's argument that "Petrarchism operates as the original colonial discourse in the Americas," he is broadening the implications Greene assigns to the sonnet to include all of literature remarking, "literature of any sort was a condition for the formation of the subject-form of the colonial elites" (29).<sup>1</sup> The power dynamics of the courtly sonnet came to be seen as a microcosm of those of an entire literary technology unleashed at the service of European cultures in violent expansion.

Insightful arguments such as these reveal the class interests and imposed social structures implicit in writings which would be disingenuously read as personal or universal utterances. At the same time, they may give credence to limited views, sometimes encouraged by anthologies used for teaching, of both the variety found among early modern sonnets and of the critical awareness of poets who wrote them from positions outside court circles of power. As Anthony Cascardi has advised, care should be taken in reading, "*absolute* power absolutely, thus yielding to the seduction that sometimes ascribes to the thesis of culture the sum of power's effects" (239). The central

literary place assigned to the sonnet as genre is arguably more of a modernist than an early modern designation. Spanish writers lent equal weight to mode—for example amorous, burlesque, or sacred—when determining the literary value of a work in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In an effort to contextualize and place Spanish Baroque texts within a theoretical view of literature's relationship to power, Tom Lewis and Francisco J. Sánchez have also observed “that literature establishes the conditions for thinking (about) the self as an entity directly dependent on the state, insofar as the state, above and beyond its embodiment as a set of juridical, political, and military institutions, is *also* a structured web of symbolic discourses” (xvi). This statement provides a nuanced basis upon which to proceed to study militarism and the sonnet as well as the subject positions conditioned by poetry. Literary forms do not simply serve as vehicles for state interests, but rather they structure how individual voices can engage the discourses that support the state.

With this in mind, my teaching of early modern poetry begins by questioning the assumption that genre and ideology are always clearly linked. Opposing and comparing literary types can lead students to a reductive simplification of works, and many genres with a slightly more contemporary feel, such as Francisco de Quevedo's satirical *Sueños*, critique social ills from an aristocratic vantage point that offers traditionally punitive solutions for disobedient underlings. If we oppose pastoral poetry to picaresque narrative for example, as Claudio Guillén did, then the comparison might very well show poetry to encapsulate the ideals of a retrograde court culture, rather than the gritty lived experience of roads and towns found in the developing form of the novel that will accompany humanity into the democratic age. I doubt that it is fruitful to pose the question of whether courtly poetry is a more elitist form of literature, one that supports the military goals of colonial expansion and cultural dominance to a greater degree than say, narrative. I would rather view depth of content and awareness of engagement in cultural traditions both oral and textual, along with choice of form, as markers of works that merit close critical attention.

In fact, history is replete with examples of new forms of writing (and mass communication) being emptied of the radical content that first characterized them and then appropriated by dominant ideologies. In 1531, when Andreas Alciato's first emblem book appeared, it used images to disseminate moral philosophy in a highly memorable way. Sebastian Neumeister has demonstrated how by 1640 the same form was being used as a tool for political propaganda by Diego Saavedra Fajardo, who, as an ideological conservative is a, “representante del viejo mundo, [que] para defenderlo, sigue nuevos rumbos” (219). Using

a genre meant for humanist education under these circumstances has to be closely scrutinized as a strategic maneuver. Is it really possible to reject ways of thought simply by rejecting old forms, and conversely, by taking over successful new genres, and remaking them, can one ever completely control them? At the same time, although literary forms served the goals of Spanish military and linguistic expansion, they are not transparently comprehensible. Students need to gain technical expertise, cultural knowledge, and experience in gleaning meanings from old or difficult texts, before evaluating them historically.

The sonnet tradition, although associated with courtly love, was already based on an implicit violence before it was used in Spain to glorify national interests or aggrandize the figure of a messianic king. Nancy Vickers showed how Petrarch's sonnets enumerated and divided his beloved Laura's constituent parts, effectively dismembering her and reinforcing the strength of the poet's subject position. Laura, an object of desire that was eventually transformed into spiritual intermediary, exemplifies how a physical body can be appropriated and dematerialized through poetic representation. Her name is converted into a linguistic vehicle that supports not her own will and voice, which are unknowns in Petrarch's poetry, but rather serves the will and voice of the poet. Many scholars have discussed the traditional silence of the feminine subject that appears in the sonnet, and how her transformation into artistic object serves the construction of a poet's identity and the social value of his work. For this reason, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's well-known sonnet on her portrait, "Este, que ves, engaño colorido," is a welcome critical response to this dynamic, although it appears late in the Baroque. Sor Juana's sonnet exemplifies the dilemma of the woman writer who, in order to deconstruct a silencing tradition, also pulls the rug out from underneath a claim to her own poetic voice's subjective power.

Needed research on women's poetry from this period has brought other voices to our attention that articulate similar poetic concerns as those of Sor Juana. Elizabeth Boyce and Julian Olivares's *Tras el espejo la musa escribe* includes Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán (1611-1663?), who composed this sonnet on a portrait of a lady, also questioning the power of an artistic construction over material reality:

Retrato, si eres sombra ¿cómo imitas  
 al sol de más lucientes resplandores?  
 Muerto, ¿cómo están vivos tus colores?  
 Sin vida, ¿cómo tantas vidas quitas?

Sin cuerpo muchas almas acreditas;  
 sin alma, ¿dónde forjas los rigores?  
 Si Clori es sin segunda en los primores,  
 ¿cómo darle segunda solicitas?

Eres una apariencia que recrea  
 (gozada de los ojos solamente),  
 una ilusión alegre de la idea,  
 un engaño que finge en lo aparente,  
 una ficción que el gusto lisonjea,  
 mentira, al fin, que a la verdad desmiente. (*Tras el espejo* 156)

The effect of Ramírez's sonnet, earlier than Sor Juana's but preserved only in manuscript form, is to reveal art's lack of substance and so question not its power, which she recognizes, but the legitimacy of its power. Clori, as a reference to the poet, appears as both speaking subject and object of the portrait. So Ramírez's poem achieves a doubling effect; her own self-representation is presented as truth compared to the portrait's fiction.

A questioning of Petrarchism and the uses to which the sonnet was being put was in the air in early seventeenth century Spain when the decay of imperial ambitions was evident. But female poets like Ramírez engaged in these debates privately. Nieves Baranda, in her study of women's participation in public poetry contests at this time, explains that while women writers were beginning to win a literary space of repute for themselves, the exposure to public scrutiny may have been cause for hesitation, "Quizás para las mujeres, considerando la misoginia imperante, la equiparación entre la palabra pública y la desnudez corporal o falta de modestia y las críticas hacia las cultas, esta exhibición fuera impúdica y arriesgada" (35).

Ramírez's unmasking of the subject/object dynamics of Petrarchism is accompanied in her poems by an awareness of the emptiness of the national glorification of militarism as well. Her dry commentary on the death of a well-dressed young soldier shows again a comparison of the material substance of life contrasted ironically with the literary values of fame, name, memory, and valor:

Moriste, joven, en edad florida  
 dando vida a tu fama con tu muerte.  
 No te engañó, te mejoró la suerte,  
 pues pasas por la muerte a mejor vida.  
 Si la parca fatal, enfurecida,  
 cortó el hilo a tu vida, bien se advierte  
 que envidia fue, porque tu brazo fuerte  
 no le quitase el nombre de homicida.

No aclame el enemigo la victoria  
 de que agostó tan verde primavera,  
 al tiempo muerta y viva a la memoria.

Tu valor te mató, que no pudiera  
 otro que el lograr tan gran victoria,  
 y quiso echar el resto en la postrera. (*Tras el espejo* 155)

The paradoxes in Ramírez's verses on the silenced young man, such as "muerta y viva," recall the style of Quevedo and suggest that male and female writers were inseparable cultural players. Studying women's verse in the context of the intellectual debates and literary fashions of their male contemporaries has the effect of fleshing out the uses to which the genre of the sonnet was put in battles between ideological camps within Spain.

For example, in a sonnet from 1614 Luis de Góngora trespasses the thematic territory of the genre by using its structure as the vehicle for a letter from the battlefield by a rank and file soldier to his aunt:

Llegué, señora tía, a la Mamora,  
 donde entre nieblas vi la otra mañana,  
 desde el seguro de una partesana,  
 confusa multitud de gente mora.

Pluma acudiendo va tremoladora  
 andaluza, extremeña y castellana,  
 pidiendo, si vitela no mongana,  
 cualquier fresco rumor de cantimplora.

Allanó alguno la enemiga tierra  
 echándose a dormir; otro soldado,  
 gastador vigilante, con su pico  
 biscocho labra. Al fin, en esta guerra  
 no vi más fuerte, sino el levantado.

De la Mamora. Hoy miércoles. Juanico. (196)

The poet assumes the voice of a fictionalized Juanico, present at a historically contemporary attempt by the Spanish army to establish a stronghold on the African coast, in order to satirize the pomp of courtiers arriving to lend their doubtful aid. Instead of by raised swords, he figures them through the metonymy of trembling cap feathers. Their

lack of valor is equaled only by their interest in food, drink and sleep. As interesting as poems like this are to me, I recognize that to categorize sonnets according to their ideological content may do little more than replicate and impose contemporary perspectives on old texts. A better method, that reveals how the subject positions of these poets specifically relate to the early modern Spanish state, is one suggested by a question found in the poems themselves: what is the relationship between materiality and discourses? Interesting readings can result when we compare what we know of an author's material social reality to the power dynamics at work in his or her poetry.

As an example of this, I would like to look at one war sonnet in particular by the poet Cristobalina Fernández de Alarcón (1576?-1646), a merchant-class married woman who participated in the literary circle of her native Antequera. Some of her poetry, unlike Ramírez's, was published mainly because Fernández frequently participated in poetic jousts. Still, of the hundreds of poems she was reported to have written by her contemporaries, only fourteen are extant (Osuna 241). Fernández's "A la Batalla de Lepanto" was included in *La segunda parte de las flores de poetas ilustres de España* in 1611. The sonnet appears at first glance to be another glorification of Spanish nationalism, focusing upon the precise moment in the naval battle of 1571 when the Ottoman Turks were defeated at Lepanto by the Christian League, headed by Spain's Don Juan de Austria, son of Carlos V. This moment of victory for Spain is evoked by Fernández through a sensory palimpsest of history and metaphysics. The sensory perceptions she evokes are of smoke rising to sky, water stained with blood, the smell of gunpowder, the cries of the dying, and the clear sound of the Spanish commander's voice shouting a supplication to Mary:

De la pólvora el humo sube al cielo;  
 busca el cielo su esfera, y entre tanto  
 mira Neptuno con terror y espanto,  
 teñido en sangre su cerúleo velo;  
 al centro profundísimo del suelo  
 bajan mil almas con eterno llanto  
 a contar la batalla de Lepanto,  
 y otras vuelan al reino del consuelo;  
 cuando de Carlos el valiente hijo,  
 español Escipión, César triunfante,  
 levantando en sus hechos su memoria:  
 "¡Virgen Señora del Rosario –dijo–,  
 vencid nuestro enemigo!", y al instante  
 se oyó por los cristianos la victoria. (*Tras el espejo* 441)

The meaning of this battle is constructed by fragments of myth, past history and texts, ordered by the supreme power of the Virgin working in favor of the Christians. Classical myth is present in the personification of the sea god, Neptune, who looks with horror and shock into the deep center of the earth into which the souls of the dead are descending. As in the epics of Homer, the dead will retell their loss in battle in the underworld.

Don Juan de Austria is a new Scipio; just as the Romans fought the Carthaginians more than one thousand years before, so do the Spaniards battle the Turks in a conflation of cultures that allows a continuous trans-historical struggle to be constructed between the followers of Christianity and Islam, the populations of Europe and those of Africa and Asia. Not only do allusions to myth and history serve to refract the light in which the poetic voice views this event, the trajectory of western metaphysics from paganism to Christianity is traced in the sonnet. The old sea god is terrified, presiding only over a vision of a thousand deaths, while towards the heavenly kingdom of consolation the souls of the saved fly upwards. The vertical axis of the poem is evident, as is its hierarchy: "Busca el cielo su esfera." As smoke and souls rise to heaven's sphere, the poetic voice focuses first on where Neptune is, and then further down yet to the entryway to the depths of hell. At the very bottom are dead enemy soldiers, and at the top is the Queen of heaven. At the level of the battle the Spanish leader's call upon Mary to defeat their enemy is awaited. The Virgin's response and her effect are instantaneous; victory is heard for the Christians. The voice of the Spanish commander accesses the divine power of Mary in the aspect of Our Lady of the Rosary, recalling that the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary was instituted by Pope Pious V on the occasion of the Christian victory at Lepanto.

The sonnet presents a metaphysics in which the feminine Mary is the active fulcrum of Spanish military triumph, and so it could be read as a clear vindication of feminine agency. But when one contextualizes a reading of this poem amid the recorded details of Cristobalina Fernández's life, a fuller text emerges, a biographical poetic text that suggests women's subject positions shaped and were shaped by the discourses evident in a poem like "A la Batalla de Lepanto," in which the divine mother triumphs and legitimates the value of a Christian victory and a Muslim defeat.

First it will be necessary to go over a few details from Cristobalina Fernández's biography found in the documents collected by Francisco Rodríguez Marín. She was illegitimate, the *hija natural* of Gonzalo Fernández Perdigón of Antequera and an unmentioned woman. The economic advantage her first husband Agustín de los Ríos, a merchant

and business associate of her father's, gained from marrying her and then refusing to leave her an inheritance at the request of his mother highlights Fernández's social vulnerability. Yet the economic and individual disadvantages she suffered are light compared to deeper oppression of other women in her society lacking her middle class position and power. The archives show numerous transactions regarding slave women and their children taking place in Fernández's household. For example, her first husband made a point of the fact that they had no children in his second will, also stating that he did not have any illegitimate children. But on December 5 of that year, a few days before his death, he sold an enslaved woman named Leonor, a twenty-six year old *mulatta*, to a slave merchant of Granada for the sum of forty ducados, along with her four-month old son Francisco also legally a slave, conceived and born after Leonor was purchased. He stipulates in the document that she is to be set free in eight years, as was agreed upon when he purchased her. It is not improbable that the child was his, and he was removing him from the household at the request of his mother, or Fernández. Another woman, the thirty year old Juana of Berber ancestry, is sold by Fernández after his death for five times this amount to her own aunt Isabel Bautista.

Fernández married again on July 28, 1606, to Juan Francisco Correa, a native of Lisbon now living in Antequera. In 1608 they have a legal issue involving another enslaved woman described as Inés Hernández, thirty-eight years old, well-built, white. She was purchased by Fernández before her marriage to Juan Francisco; now Inés has given birth to a baby girl, María, whom Juan Francisco has baptized. They decide to make null and void the contract of sale with the original owner, Juan de Aguilar de la Torre, who admits to having the mother and daughter under his power and agrees to buy them back by paying the original price, ninety-nine ducados, plus one. In the documents it is noted that Fernández did not attend the legal meeting and that Juan Francisco was acting in her stead. It would be conjecture to make a judgment as to whether Juan Francisco or Aguilar de la Torre were the father of the child, but we can learn from this that Fernández observed in her own household the conditions of slavery as experienced by other women.

Our understanding of the sonnet is enriched with knowledge of these biographical details. Enslaved women, like the individuals Fernández lived with and had power over, were often acquired through corsair raids on the North African coasts and through warfare considered legitimate by the Spanish State. In contrast, the figure of Our Lady of the Rosary, who intercedes for the Christians in the Battle, represents the miraculous triumph of the vulnerable mother and her



child. One can read the sonnet as an attempt by Fernández to create a cohesive narrative that legitimated her own material reality and smoothed out the logical conflicts between slavery and Christianity.

First, *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* is the title for the Virgin that identifies her with miracles performed by or through her. She is not tied to geography, instead her life exemplifies the Christian cycle of redemption. In the recitation of the prayers of the rosary one would practice imagining the miracles of Mary: the Angel Gabriel's visit to her, her encounter with Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, her presentation of Jesus in the temple, her suffering at the crucifixion, her assumption into heaven, and, her coronation. The blue, white, and red of the sonnet's sky, smoke and blood, as well as the upward movement and horrified male god of paganism below the sphere of the Virgin recall the colors, structure, and upward movement in contemporary iconography of the *Milagrosa*, rising to heaven with the serpent under her feet. This iconography of Mary is based on the dream vision of the woman and the dragon in the Bible's *Revelation 12*, where a pregnant woman appears in the sky, crowned with stars and a crescent moon at her feet, only to be pursued by a dragon ready to eat her child as soon as it is born. Fernández's poetic text seems to flicker off the biblical text, where in John's dream, a war breaks out in heaven, the dragon is seen to be the serpent Satan, and is thrown down to earth and sea, "the dragon was furious with the woman and went off to fight against the rest of her descendants, all those who obey God's commandments and are faithful to the truth revealed by Jesus" (12:17). The tradition of the Virgin of the Rosary responds to this threat by interpreting the difficult events of Mary's life as a string of miracles. The archetypal trials of motherhood: pregnancy, delivery, nurturing of a child, loss of control of the child, fear of the child's victimization and death, as well as one's own death, are thus positively transformed. These events, fraught with physical risk, economic hardship, pain and fear, are then viewed as ultimately redemptive in Christianity.

I would argue that the glorification of Spain's imperial ambitions is not the main point of the sonnet, for the Spanish state is only the momentary protagonist in a timeless battle of mother and child against the enemy. The persecution and threat to an individual mother and child reinforces a Christian mythic structure of a battle between good and evil. When this structure is used to interpret recent history, the justification for subjecting the enemy to your will is the triumph of God's side over the side of Satan. So, it can be used to rationalize the suffering of other mothers and children under your own power. In Fernández's sonnet, it is also significant that it is the illegitimate son of a monarch who calls upon the mother of God. Fernández's own

relationship to her parents is unclear. She seems to have lived with her father's sisters; he was married and had a legitimate daughter about Fernández's age. She had no mother of record and in her sonnet she gives the voice of power to Don Juan de Austria, also born to an unmarried mother but of royal lineage. For Don Juan, and perhaps the poet, the Virgin provides a substitute divine mother, on a scale great enough to exalt her worshiper and intimate enough that he can hope to be heard. The Virgin's response to his prayer legitimates his value both as leader of the Spanish military force and leader of the Christians.

Fernández's war sonnet demonstrates that Petrarchism and Spanish militarism did combine well within this form of poetry, for the construction of the self in the sonnet is dependent on the fragmentation and silencing of others. But it also reveals, in Ruth El Saffar's words, "the intricate and painful process by which a self emerges from successive rejections of the structures by which they were defined" (196). Battles in favor of feminine agency in early modern women's poetry are well worth studying. Fernández's work reminds us that these battles of the self were complexly conditioned by class and religious traditions, as well as the laws of marriage, inheritance and commerce.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Beverley's citation of Roland Greene is from Greene's manuscript, "For Love of *Pau-Brasil*: Petrarchan Experience and the Colonial Americas," paper presented at The English Institute, 1990 (Beverley 146).

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