

A NOTE ON THE PROLOGUE TO SOR JUANA'S *SUEÑO*

Elias L. Rivers

The State University of New York at Stony Brook

The prologue to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Primero Sueño* is a clearly delimited unit of 150 lines, entitled "Noche y sueño del cosmos" in the Sabat-Rivers edition (pp. 435-39). It begins with a baroque scientific evocation of night as the shadow, shaped like an Egyptian pyramid or group of obelisks, that is cast by the dark side of the Earth upon the Moon and into stellar space by a revolving Ptolomaic Sun. The narrative focus quickly shifts from astronomy to the sub-lunar world of our Earth, where nocturnal birds and bats still flit in growing silence as fish and animals and birds everywhere go to sleep. The 146 hendecasyllables and heptasyllables in *silva* form, with their complex syntax and run-on lines, lead up to these four simple lines, without enjambment, that serve as a *remate* or coda:

El sueño todo, en fin, lo poseía:
todo, en fin, el silencio lo ocupaba,
aun el ladrón dormía,
aun el amante no se desvelaba.

As a classical antecedent for this prologue, the great annotator A. Méndez Plancarte (p. 584) cites only Statius's Latin *Silvae* V, 4. No one, so far as I know, has pointed out that there is a much more generalized antecedent, in Latin and in Italian, which we may identify as a commonplace or *topos* usually associated with the words "nox erat, et . . .". The contemporary Spanish poet Enrique Moreno Castillo has recently documented this *topos* in his *Anotaciones al Poema heroico a Cristo resucitado de Francisco de Quevedo* (51-53), citing as the *locus classicus* Virgil's *Aeneid*, IV, 522-528:

Nox erat, et placidum carpebant fessa soporem
 corpora per terras, silvaeque et saeva quierant
 aequora, cum medio volvuntur sidera lapsu,
 cum tacet omnis ager, pecudes pictaeque volucres
 quaeque lacus late liquidos, quaeque aspera dumis
 rura tenent, somno positae sub nocte silenti
 lenibant curas et corda oblita laborum.

[It was night, and throughout the Earth exhausted
 bodies enjoyed their placid slumber; the woods and
 wild seas had sunk to quiet rest while stars roll
 midway in their gliding course and all the land is still,
 while flocks and brightly colored birds, those that
 swim the broad liquid lakes and those that dwell in
 brambles and rough fields, recline in sleep beneath
 the silent night, resting from their cares with hearts
 forgetful of their labors.]

Moreno in his note (p. 51) refers to very similar passages elsewhere
 in Virgil, and in Ovid, Horace, Propertius, Valerius Flaccus, Silius
 Italicus, Statius, Claudian, Dante, Sannazaro, Ariosto, Tasso,
 Marino.

Sor Juana had many of these passages in the back of her well-
 read mind as she began her “nox erat” with 18 complicated lines
 in a baroque poetic idiom:

Piramidal, funesta, de la tierra
 nacida sombra al cielo encaminaba
 de varios obeliscos punta altiva,
 escalar pretendiendo las estrellas . . .

We can see in Virgil’s “cum medio volvuntur sidera lapsu” a
 point of departure for Sor Juana’s astronomical explanation of
 night. Her lines 19-24 correspond to Virgil’s “volucres . . . sub
 nocte silenti.” Her own silent night

en la quietud contenta
 de imperio silencioso,
 sumisas sólo voces consentia

de las nocturnas aves,
tan oscuras, tan graves,
que aun el silencio no se interrumpía.

Her “El mar ya no alterado” is his “saeva quierant aequora.”

But there is no Virgilian antecedent for her fish “dos veces mudos” or for her elaborate mythological animals: the incestuous screech-owl that sacrilegiously drinks olive oil from the temple lamps, the three Theban maidens transformed into bats by Bacchus for ignoring his rites, as well as several other birds and animals with similar mythological and moral attributes. These elaborations simply give new baroque life to the traditional Virgilian commonplace of “Nox erat, et caetera . . .”

Works Cited

- Moreno Castillo, Enrique. *Anotaciones al Poema heroico a Cristo resuscitado de Francisco de Quevedo*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2008.
- Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Obras completas de SJIC, tomo I, Lirica personal*. Ed. Alfonso Méndez Plancarte. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951.
- _____. *Poesía, Teatro, Pensamiento: lirica personal, lirica coral, teatro, prosa*. Eds. Georgina Sabat de Rivers y Elias Rivers. Madrid: Espasa, 2004.
- Vergilius Maro, Publius. *Virgil*, revised edition, H. Rushton Fairclough, vol. I. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986.

Author's Note

The following works should be added to the bibliography of my article "Voice, Writing, and Echo in the Structure of Garcilaso's *Égloga tercera*," published in the previous issue of *Caliope* 14.1 (2008): 23-46:

Bonadeo, Alessia. *Mito e natura allo specchio: L'eco nel pensiero greco e latino*. Pisa: ETS, 2003.

Braschi, Giannina. "La metamorfosis del ingenio en la *Égloga III* de Garcilaso." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 4 (1970): 19-36.

Fernández-Morera, Darío. *The Lyre and the Oaten Flute: Garcilaso and the Pastoral*. London: Tamesis, 1982.

Lapesa, Rafael. *Garcilaso: estudios completos*. Madrid: Istmo, 1985.

Navarrete, Ignacio. *Orphans of Petrarch: Poetry and Theory in the Spanish Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.

Vergil. *P. Vergili Maronia Opera*. R. A. B. Mynors, ed. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969.

Paul Carranza