

Monstrous Maneuvers and Maneuvering the Monstrous in Two of Sor Juana's Dialogic *Romances*

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The recent upsurge of studies published to date delineating the ways early modern women writers across the European and European-influenced traditions succeeded in questioning, challenging, and transgressing patriarchal codes in their works is astounding considering the longstanding undervalued or overlooked status of many of these women-authored texts. From resourceful discursive strategies to innovative character depictions—as well as other creative literary techniques—such texts attest to the degree that women authors were aware of and interrogated their social condition as it related to gender. Nancy K. Miller refers to our relationship as readers to this phenomenon of deciphering as arachnology, understood as “the critical positioning which reads *against* the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity” (272).¹ Arachnologies encourage the reappropriation of texts (272) which, as a result, can sometimes reveal “the sometimes brutal traces of the culture of gender, the inscriptions of its political structures” (275). Viewing texts in this way not only validates the study of early modern women’s writing as a historical artifact but also warrants its reexamination, as Naomi J. Miller argues: “early female-authored polemical texts revised cultural commonplaces in order to open new avenues of debate” (147). With this idea in mind, this essay (re)considers the poetic production of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as an expression of monstrosity that affords new perspectives on authoring, agency, and alterity.

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Within the Hispanic tradition, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's literary production—with its countless layers, facets, and circumstances—has been a literary goldmine for critics who focus on gender studies.² Doubly marginalized as a result of her gender and her subordinated role within the Church, to study the work of Sor Juana offers both secular and sacred perspectives from a singular individual during a volatile historical period.³ As an intellectual, writer, and nun, Sor Juana is truly in a league of her own and remains an active participant in a story that continues to unfold today. While certain privileged and talented women in the early modern Spanish tradition (Ana Caro, María de Zayas, Mariana de Carvajal) were afforded a professional writing space in society, others wrote informally to educate and, in certain cases, to merely survive (Vollendorf 93, 169, 166). Sor Juana is at once like and different from these women: privileged yet persecuted, revered yet scorned, blessed yet cursed. For this reason, she has been viewed, and read, as a monstrous figure, with all the positive and negative connotations the term embodies. It is no surprise, then, that early critics labeled her as “histérica . . . tipo viriloide” (Abreu Gómez 21–22) (hysterical . . . a mannish woman) on one hand and a “un pájaro milagroso, prisionero” (Vossler 17) (a wondrous, imprisoned bird) on the other. By taking her to descriptive extremes, Sor Juana's monstrosity, by definition, intensifies in ways that are at once unsettling and alluring.

Despite—or perhaps because of—her unique condition, the poetic jousts (“*palestras*”) in which Sor Juana participated substantiated her skill, confidence, and competitiveness. These contests, characterized by wit and ingenuity and derived from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poetic debates, figure as a notable detail in the understanding Sor Juana's life. John G. Cummins affirms that claims to superiority and the desire for renown were two primary motivators for rival poets, especially for those with established reputations (308). Sor Juana is like her peers in this regard, as Frederick Luciani maintains: “Fame itself is Sor Juana's courtly portfolio, which legitimates her public and political speech” (23). Where she differs, however, is a place of critical interest and inquiry. Because the focus of these lyrical matches where Sor Juana was involved was often Sor Juana herself, a twofold event ensues by default: Not only does she symbolically wage war with her opponent but also herself. Mindful of her accredited inscrutability, Sor Juana is consistently compelled to self-defend, refute, or reinscribe. This phenomenon relates to what Barbara Johnson dubs “the struggle for feminine authorship” (3), which arises at the juncture of motherhood, writing as a woman, and autobiography.

Due to the controversies that afflicted Sor Juana during much of her adult life, the broad theme of camouflage as a textual, protective strategy would seem expected, justified, and appropriate. Whether visual, verbal, or a combination of the two, Sor Juana as a writer repeatedly relies on varying

forms of concealment to promote her agenda. Dario Puccini deems her a master of disguise in many of her poetic creations (52), which recalls “the fictionalization of the ‘I’” Jean Franco references (29). Sor Juana’s versatility attests to her protean proclivities, and the quality of the voices she engenders and enables thus raises important questions regarding the potency of performativity.⁴ Façades of all shapes and sizes in Sor Juana’s writings signal at once textual conformity and resistance. While this idea of masquerade as a textual strategy in Sor Juana is not new, its dimensions merit further exploration, as evinced in a close reading of two of her minor occasional poems, which offer a commentary on the confluence of gender, monstrosity, and women’s writing.⁵

In “Romance que un caballero recién venido a la Nueva España escribió a la Madre Juana” (A *romance* that a recently arrived gentleman to New Spain wrote to Mother Juana) and “Romance que respondió nuestra poetiza al caballero” (*Romance* in which our poetess responded to the gentleman), an unnamed poet and Sor Juana engage in verbal exchange.⁶ Unlike some of her other epistolary poems with dialogic qualities, here the male poet’s identity is difficult if not impossible to ascertain, as it fails to textually manifest.⁷ Alfonso Méndez Plancarte attempts to make a connection between the *romances* in question and two separate *romances*, speculating that regarding the poem the *caballero* writes, “Podría pensarse en el mismo peruano Navarrete, al que contesta el num. 48” (435n)⁸ (It could be that same Peruvian Navarrete, who answers number 48). His use of the conditional tense, however, confirms that the renowned critic is unable to definitively determine the gentleman’s identity, which fortuitously serves as a reminder of the prevalence of disguise as a theme in the works of Sor Juana. Despite her participation in the aforementioned *justas*, this versified tête-à-tête could be read as another example of textual masquerade.⁹ Another set of epistolary poems sheds additional light on this premise.

In his edition of her *Obras completas*, Méndez Plancarte identifies three *romances* in which a poet addresses and is then countered by Sor Juana.¹⁰ One in particular, “En que responde la Poetisa, con la discreción que acostumbraba” (To which the Poetess responds, with standard discretion), urges her immediate participation through a mysterious “socorro de respuesta” (immediate answer). From the first stanza, Sor Juana’s tone and words exhibit disconcertedness with her addresser’s anonymity, as well as her own decision to eventually engage him: “Allá va, aunque no debiera” (1) (Here it is, although I shouldn’t). Her choice to label him “incognito señor mío” (2) (my unknown sir) questions his motives—not to mention her better judgment (“como quien / escribe sin albedrío” [42–43] [like someone/ who writes unwillingly])— as well as his duplicity: “cuando / se oculta el nombre, es indicio / que no habéis querido ser / hombre de nombre conmigo” (5–7) (as/ your name is hidden, it is an indication / that you did

not want to be / a man with a name). Logically, Sor Juana would need to know from whose hand the poem originated if she were to answer accordingly and authoritatively. Sor Juana proceeds to subtly chide her addressee throughout the *romance*, using his clandestinity as her motivation and focus. She comments that despite his secrecy, his writing nonetheless holds clues to his identity (“en su oculto artificio / en cada copla una fuerza” [14–15] [in your hidden artifice / lies in each stanza a force]) and that for this reason, his name “pues aunque quedó encerrado / tiene tan claros indicios” (177–78) (although hidden / the signs are clear). Upon revealing that his verses, in her estimation, exaggerate her talent, she sets out to single-handedly expose him.¹¹ Although by the poem’s end the reader is aware that Sor Juana knew all along to whom she was writing (el Conde de la Granja), her obsession with wanting to know and more importantly make known consumes the entire poem and underlines her unquenchable thirst for knowledge, which recalls her “negra inclinación” (unfortunate predisposition) manifest in *La respuesta*.¹²

Due to the competitive nature of these types of dialogic exchanges and the need to recognize one’s poetic opponent, especially in the case of Sor Juana—who would need to know her adversary in order to give the best rejoinder possible—it seems odd that the identity of “Romance a un caballero” escapes Sor Juana’s inquisitiveness. For this reason, while the titles in question allude to an epistolary, response-eliciting exchange between two independent authors, I suggest it is possible to read the first poem as a daring, premeditated performance enacted solely by Sor Juana.¹³ At most, this idea offers a radical, new way to look at Sor Juana as a literary self-fashioner (Luciani 26) as well as her dialogic poems and strategies in their historical context; at the least—even if the hypothesis miscarries—it nonetheless offers considerable insight into some of Sor Juana’s writing methods, what Luciani describes as disassociating the male with power (29).

If anyone was capable of such literary resourcefulness, it would have been Sor Juana, who, under this premise, becomes the puppet master of her own show. The discourse of the fictitious male poet she arrogates adds depth to the enactment and illustrates why transgressive opportunities often arise at gender border crossings: “for a woman to dress, act, or position herself in discourse as a man is easily understandable and culturally compelling” (Russo 330). Perhaps, by assuming the identity of a male poet, Sor Juana could more easily address issues of fame and reputation, which, from the tone of both poems, had her on the defensive. Given that her male contemporaries were primarily responsible for these attacks,¹⁴ by “becoming” a man in the first poem and responding as herself in the second, she would be able to construct a verisimilar situation that acted as a microcosm of societal discourse. The two poems, as a result, become more than mere individual expressions in verse. Rather, they function as an

interconnected whole by engaging one another in a clever, transgressive pseudo-dialogue whose aim is to flesh out, through arguments and counterarguments, Sor Juana's literary ingenuity as a product of female monstrosity.

The two poems allow a dialogue that is telling, profound, and powerful to unfurl. The discursive nature of the poems exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin's view that dialogue is imbued with complex meanings because it not only extends to the direct participants of the exchange but also to a multiplicity of outside voices. These types of voices pervade both poems as glimpses of societal opinion. Moreover, each poem is highly dependent upon and cannot be fully understood without its counterpart, as each informs and is informed by the other. This multidirectional exchange allows Sor Juana to channel her creative genius as well as deliver assessments and observations regarding her capacity as a woman and a writer. Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia exemplifies the transgressive potential and Sor Juana's awareness of the power of dialogue, particularly as gender issues come to the forefront and other outside, critical voices permeate the texts in question.

The appropriation of another's voice yields powerful moments in both poems, particularly as the latter relates to the overarching theme of monstrosity. Sor Juana's possible gender masquerade in the first *romance* aligns with Rosi Braidotti's definition of a monster: "a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm" (65). In her response, Sor Juana not only shields herself against all allegations but also uses the charges to her advantage. These hypotheses relate to Stephanie Merrim's contention that "even as she writes herself as a literal monster Sor Juana proves herself eminently aware of the contradictory, 'monstrous' implications of being considered one" (31). Some of the outstanding aspects of female monsters, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, include "excessive appetite, anarchic violence, and perverse or misdirected sexuality" (49), which metaphorically manifest in Sor Juana's poems as self-consumption, textual conflict, and gender bending, respectively. Collectively, these characteristics reinforce Sor Juana's status as a knowledge-seeking and agency-imbued individual. As a result, the idea of Sor Juana as master of disguise underscores Barbara Creed's notion that "the female monster, or the monstrous feminine, wears many faces" (1). Sor Juana, as an iconic cultural female figure, taps into the monstrous in order to be understood as an agent of influence and authority and conversely, to be misconstrued as one of danger and anxiety, which recalls the "battle of representation between self-assertion and self-erasure" (143) Merrim mentions as well as what Moraña considers the dominant themes in and characteristics of Sor Juana's poetry in general: precociousness, humanistic vocation, creative fecundity, and personal persecutions (101).¹⁵

This essay explores the ways in which the discursive construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the self is an extension of female

monstrosity. By resisting, transgressing, and negotiating discursively, Sor Juana is in the end able to (re)create the self to ensure a permanent status of eminence, all the while celebrating the ingenuity of the female subject's monstrous manifestations. In the end, Sor Juana manages to reinscribe the traditional connotations of monsters as they apply to women in a way that repositions them not necessarily from negative to positive but rather along the axis of the two. In a bold move, Sor Juana exploits the possibilities this literary invention affords her for personal means and to further her own agenda, which ultimately signals self-vindication and facilitates self-advancement.

The alleged *caballero* first highlights Sor Juana's alleged capacity to eclipse the work of her contemporaries through the trope of reduction: "Madre que haces chiquitos / (no es pulla, no) a los más grandes / pues pones en cuclillas / los Ingenios más Gigantes" (1–4) (Mother, you minimize and humble / [this isn't a joke] even the biggest men / the Greatest Geniuses).¹⁶ On a fundamental level, the *caballero* in question personifies a Greek hero who both fears and admires the mythical creature he pursues; he describes Sor Juana as rarer than the Phoenix and sets out to find her (37–38).¹⁷ The act of lessening, seen here as a symbolic castration, figures as a double threat: on one hand, it speaks to Sor Juana's aptitude as a writer; on the other, it emphasizes her ability to make her rivals succumb, allowing her to challenge the notions of virility and authority in one fell swoop. Sor Juana's plume is conceptualized as a competition-engaging apparatus ready for battle.

The gentleman's adulation of Sor Juana, however, also reflects subtle, ambivalent undertones. For example, although he aggrandizes the image of the mythical Juana by comparing her to an "Ave" with a capital "A" and the regenerating, immortal Phoenix, he also equates her with a "mosca muerta" (wolf in sheep's clothing) who rises from the ashes (39–40).¹⁸ He likewise plays with the semantics of the word "Mother" in the paradoxical verse "Madre sin poder ser Madre" (6) (A Mother unable to be a mother), an allusion to her alienation from childbearing and biological motherhood. Sor Juana's irregularities compel the *caballero* to embark on the previously referenced pilgrimage to meet her face to face in order to corroborate opinions and bear witness—perhaps due to geographical limitations—to what others merely have been able to surmise.¹⁹

These verses are particularly heteroglot in nature, as the *caballero*'s voice echoes that of others who share his cynical opinions of Sor Juana. Heteroglossia deepens the poem's meaning and impact by exposing these voices, thus aggrandizing the image of Sor Juana. Bakhtin states that "in any actual dialogue the rejoinder also leads such a double life: it is structured and conceptualized in the context of the dialogue as a whole, which consists of its own utterances ('own' from the point of view of the speaker) and of alien

utterances (those of the partner)” (284). Here, the *caballero* plays the role of the town herald, but rather than provide information, he solicits it from fellow citizens. The act itself attests to Sor Juana’s fame and notoriety as evinced by the inserted quotation marks:²⁰

“¿Quién sabe, decía a gritos,
de un Pájaro cuya carne
es tostada con canela,²¹
aunque es poco confortante?
de aquel que, si tiene sed,
de perlas se satisface,
y se harta de calabaza
si es que le aprieta el hambre;
con quien son niños de teta
los de más luengas edades:
Néstor aun trae metedero,
y Mathusalem pañales?” (41–52)

(Who knows, I shouted,
a Bird whose flesh
is cinnamon-toasted
although of little relief?
Of the one who, when thirsty,
quenches her thirst with pearls,
who gorges on gourds
when overwhelmed with hunger;
with whom the oldest of men
become nursing children:
Néstor still uses a napkin
and Methusalem, diapers.)

The *caballero* backhandedly underscores Sor Juana’s distinctiveness, which is at once enthralling and disconcerting due to the underlying antagonism and anxiety it embodies.²² For example, he equates her with the Phoenix, described as a cinnamon bird who drinks pearls to satisfy its thirst. At the same time, he intimates that she metaphorically breastfeeds Methusalem, the oldest biblical man to ever live, with her wisdom. The Phoenix’s thirst, which highlights deficiency, in combination with the incongruous, anachronical image of a lactating nun, conveys a highly unconventional if not monstrous representation. In the end, the images the *caballero* employs favor her as an anomaly rather than a prodigy, perhaps an attempt to parrot public perception.

As the traveling gentleman retires for the evening, he peruses Sor Juana's *Primero sueño* (First dream), which literally and metaphorically represents the culmination of his journey: "me despertó / de mi letargo ignorante / Empecé a leerlo, y dije: / Cierto, que soy gran salvaje, / Si hay noche en que Apolo luce, / ¿que haya Fénix, no es más fácil?" (95–100) (I awoke / from my ignorant lethargy / I began to read it and said / It's true, I'm a total savage / Being that Apolo shines on some nights, wouldn't it be easier to have Phoenix shine?).²³ These verses validate Sor Juana's poetic acumen and hint that skeptics need only examine a handful of stanzas to second the *caballero's* discovery. His epiphany, "Más vale / sola una hoja de Juana, que quince hojas de Juanes" (106–8) (Only one page of Juana / is worth more than fifteen of a handful of men named Juan) substantiates the exceptional quality of her verses and brings the issue of gender to the forefront.²⁴ These verses recall Bakhtin's "double-voiced discourse" (324), whereby the direct intention of the speaker / character (the *caballero*) and the refracted intention of the author are simultaneously expressed. At this moment a turning point is reached as the reader acknowledges that the voyage upon which the *peregrino* has embarked—in addition to its literal meaning—is metaphorically realized through the reading process. This experience causes the enlightened gentleman to now see Sor Juana as a body of wonder, a term Stephen Greenblatt associates with that which calls attention, depends upon a suspension of categories, and is an inevitable component of the discourse of discovery (20).²⁵ This turn of events functions in multiple, complementary ways: it exonerates Sor Juana; it implicates the doubting *caballero* and those like him; and it justifies and promotes her literary prerogative.

As a result of his learning experience, the gentleman can only describe Sor Juana as "la más única y más rara / que hay desde Etiopia a Flandes" (pp) (the most unique, rarest woman/ there is from Ethiopia to Flanders) and "la Fénix que bebe / las perlas de más quilates / en los conceptos más altos / de los Poetas más graves" (pp) (The Phoenix that drinks / the most precious of pearls / of the highest concepts / of the most noble poets). His military metaphor of Sor Juana as the "Monja Almirante" (112) (Admiral Nun) in comparison to "la Monja Alférez" (111)—the pen name of Catalina de Erauso—suggests the former's superiority. The fact that the *caballero* offers Sor Juana an apology in the closing stanza for not "knowing her previously" (134), a reference to his lack of familiarity with her poetry, invalidates his and any other previous detractions. Although monsters pose interpretive challenges, the process of their engendering and dismantling by Sor Juana's own hand results in dynamic transformations that ultimately empower and inform. If, in fact, Sor Juana and the *caballero* are one in the same, the poem becomes at once a personal defense, a counterattack and a tool for self-endorsement.²⁶

The analysis of Sor Juana's poems becomes more meaningful upon comparing the first *romance*, which abounds with double-edged compliments and unsubstantiated hearsay, with the second, which turns those comments on their head. This idea dovetails with what Emilie Bergmann calls "the complex mappings of gender in the logic and politics of seeing" that come into view as a result of discursive limitations (151). Once Sor Juana's integrity is established through the *caballero's* redeeming, authenticating reading experience, she sets into motion a response that celebrates rather than denounces her monstrosity. By appropriating another's voice, Sor Juana is able to address rumors and simultaneously dispel them, all the while endorsing an agency-promoting vindication. In this way, she is able to reveal the layers of her intellect, intimating that her "monstrosity" is subjective and a merely a product of apprehension, ignorance, and baseless misgivings of others.

Sor Juana's feigned surprise, as evinced by the opening verse, indicates she has just finished reading the *caballero's* poem. This marks the continuation of her exoneration that began in the second half of the first poem; it figures as a writing shield that defensively protects and simultaneously allows her to offensively advance. First, Sor Juana counters with a series of concepts that effortlessly blend *culteranismo* and *conceptismo*. The references to Apolo, the book *Extravagantes*, Sardanapalo, and Heliogábalo are complimented by a multi-stanza elaboration of the natural world as it relates to birds, playing off and leading up to the Phoenix, the ultimate mythological bird. By listing several different species of these feathered creatures whose significance can only be understood within their convoluted *conceptista* context, including falcons and chickens (15), goshawks (17), and sparrow hawks (20), Sor Juana dexterously establishes her literary competence while showcasing her scientific, ornithological expertise.

This clever display affords Sor Juana momentum to usurp the image of the Phoenix the *caballero* has referenced and develop it in suggestive ways. Sor Juana embraces and exploits her monstrosity by recapitulating then destabilizing the gentleman's verses: "la que mira con zafiros, / la que vuela con diamantes, / la que pica con rubies (69–71) (she who looks with sapphire eyes / who flies with diamonds / who pecks with rubies). Sor Juana plays with and incapacitates Petrarchan imagery, which demonstrates Franco's contention that in the context of Sor Juana, "To write was to write within an institution. The only possible response was parody and mimicry" (43). Sor Juana then shows indications of self-effacement, a move which mimics the perpetual rise and fall of the Phoenix in order to maintain the tonal equilibrium of the poem: "El lo dice, y de manera / eficaz lo persuade, / que casi estoy por creerlo, / y de afirmarlo por casi" (97–100) (He says it and efficiently / persuades me of it / so much that I almost believe / and

affirm it myself). In the end, these types of comments are ultimately humblebrag but only in so far as they underscore subtlety and resourcefulness.

The second half of Sor Juana's reply abounds with multiple queries that expunge and recast the (literary) atrocities the *caballero* previously ascribed to her as well as any outstanding charges by others. Speaking of her monstrosity in jocular but equally impressive terms, Sor Juana wryly asks: "¿Qué mucho que yo lo admita, / pues nadie puede espantarse / de que haya quien se efenice / cuando hay quien se ensalamandre?" (113–15) (Is it too much to admit/ that nobody can be afraid of / one who "phoenixes" / when others "salamander"). These neologisms—which also double as clever examples of anthimeria—relate to Julie Greer Johnson's assertion that for Sor Juana, "The ingeniousness of her humor...lies in her ability to criticize men by reinventing their own literary representations of women" (38).²⁴ The idea of "fenixing" and "salamandering" thus function to simultaneously exalt and neutralize fear toward Sor Juana and her poetic creations.

In order for her voice in the second *romance* to reverberate, Sor Juana makes a sharp inference two stanzas later: "Pues luego, no será mucho, ni cosa para culparme, / si hay salamandras barbadas, / que haya Fénix que no barbe"²⁷ (123–24) (So, it is not my fault / if bearded salamanders exist / so could a beardless Phoenix). Here Sor Juana offers a both a commentary on her metaphorical acquittal and the ingenuity of women writers in general as she gradually redefines monstrosity as it relates to her condition as an acclaimed women poet. Rather than denounce her reputation, she reinscribes it as a more positive and meaningful attribute, as seen when she employs a gamut of tropes and figures that establish her familiarity with and mastery of the poetic economy of the time. In one stanza, for example, she ends with "según dicen los refranes" (84) (according to sayings) and begins the next with "refranes, dije, y es que me lo rogó el consonante" (85–86) (sayings, I said, in order to maintain consonant rhyme) to demonstrate her grasp of and crafty compliance with lyrical rules.²⁸ In several lines that follow, Sor Juana highlights her particularly unique circumstances as a way to reconceptualize the monstrous accusations facing her: "tengo solamente yo / de ser todo mi linaje" (131–32) (I have only myself / as my lineage);²⁹ "que he de morirme y vivirme / cuando a mí se me antojare?" (135–36) (I have to live and die / when I feel like it?); "¿Que yo soy toda mi especie / y que a nadie he de inclinarme?" (141–42) (That I am my entire species / and should lean on nobody?). Her self-referentiality and awareness of the writing process, which, according to Merrim, form part of Sor Juana's repertoire of "baroque acrobatics" (29), reemphasize her as a marginalized, enigmatic individual. The confluence of the two poems hints that while society has resorted to a discourse on the monstrous to control and criticize Sor Juana, she, rather than conform silently, uses the same imagery to denounce personal agendas

and stress the importance of perspective, which she exemplifies through a rhetorical question: “si él gusta gradüarme / de Fénix, ¿he de echar yo / a queste honor en la calle?” (110–12) (if it pleases him to confer me/ as a Phoenix, who am I to ignore such an honor?).

Sor Juana’s crowning move manifests in the last six stanzas as the diverse connotations of monsters seamlessly coalesce:

¡Qué dieran los saltimbancos,
a poder, por agarrarme
y llevarme, como Monstruo,
por esos andurriales
de Italia y Francia, que son
amigas de novedades
y que pagaran por ver
la Cabeza del Gigante
diciendo: *Quien ver el Fenix
quisiere, dos cuartos pague,
que lo muestra Maese Pedro
en la posada de Jaques!* (177–88)

(Oh, what they wouldn’t give
to be able to pin me down
and take me, like a Monster
to out-of-the-way places
like Italy and France, which
welcome such novelties
and pay to see
the Giant’s Head
saying: Whoever wishes to see the Phoenix
Maese Pedro is charging four cuartos
at Jaques’ inn.)

She accommodates her categorization by referring to herself as a “Monster” but refuses to be objectified as such. Her resistance exemplifies that while witnesses attribute monstrous characteristics to wayward women to earn control, monstrous women appropriate the same discourse as an exercise in subjectivity. Sor Juana acknowledges and accepts her condition, but at the same time shuns the idea of using it in any way that conflicts with her identity or privileges her public persona over her literary prerogative, exemplifying José Antonio Maravall’s observation that during the Baroque era, “los poetas actúan sobre la opinión pública, la hacen y deshacen” (159) (poets act on public opinion, they do and undo it). The allusions to paying to see the Giant’s Head (like a sideshow curiosity) and Maese Pedro (which

evokes the image of Don Quixote's marionette performance) demonstrate that Sor Juana is not willing to use her monstrosity to entertain, benefit, or be manipulated by others.³⁰ Instead, she vows to remain under lock and key ("debajo de treinta llaves" [192]) where, by putting pen to paper, her craft can evolve organically. These culminating verses demonstrate, from both the monster's and witnesses' vantage point, Russo's contention that "women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous and in danger" (323). Sor Juana, in these two poems, manages to counteract negative associations with monsters and reinforce positive ones, all the while mindful of their paradoxical codependency, as the poems in question substantiate.

Sor Juana establishes, though an ingenious, comprehensive literary exchange with dialogic qualities, that women writers during this time were monstrous by default and that being termed so by another was simply a harbinger of social anxiety caused by their emerging presence and potential.³¹ If, according to Cohen, "the woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a monster" ("Introduction" 9), Sor Juana's monstrosity—what Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell refer to as her "freakish views of herself" (x)—intensifies from within and outside of the text. Notwithstanding, Sor Juana shows that one person's monster is another person's mastermind, as Franco asserts: "Her procedure can perhaps be described as *écart*, a sidestepping that produced a new kind of subject" (30). Because we may never know the identity of the *caballero* in question, the idea that Sor Juana may have created an imaginary, literary companion in order to establish a forum in which a gender mask allows her to speak more freely with the world could be plausible given Sor Juana's circumstances. While masquerade can be seen as limiting rather than liberating, Moraña succinctly reminds us that more than hiding the self, masks projects it outward, toward a recreational zone where the dramatization of the social condition of those subjects occurs (129). The monstrous implications of this premise serve to underscore the equally monstrous burdens Sor Juana juggled as a woman and a writer during colonial times. Regardless of whether Sor Juana was accompanied or not in this particular writing endeavor, the poems themselves prove to what extent her monstrosity permeated her life. Sor Juana represents all female authors who, like herself, would have been perceived as social deviants, whose cultural production Stephanie Kirk associates with a "progenitura literaria monstruosa" (418) (monstrous literary offspring). More importantly, Sor Juana exemplifies why female monstrosity had to be at once accepted and disputed in order to be understood.³²

Notes

1. Elspeth Graham emphasizes the sense of camaraderie the modern reader experiences upon reading centuries-old texts: “There are pleasures that come out of identification or of empathy with others’ sense of life, and also those of recognizing difference between the personalities, the social and cultural environments of their writers, and between the seventeenth century and now” (21).
2. Stephanie Merrim explains why Sor Juana is so alluring to the modern critic: “Marginalized yet dangerously thrust into the public domain through her ever-growing fame, subordinated to church and gender hierarchies, Sor Juana developed extraordinary radar capable of extrapolating—from the patriarchal and misogynist culture to which she was subject and in which she was an active writing subject—issues weighing on women inside and outside convent Mexican walls, that is, certain central feminist and gender-related issues of the seventeenth century Western world” (xii).
3. As Yolanda San Miguel indicates, “Es importante señalar que Sor Juana escribe en un momento en que en Europa empieza a postularse el discurso epistemológico como un espacio autónomo en relación con la Iglesia” (260) (It is important to point out that Sor Juana writes at a moment in which Europe begins to consider epistemological discourse as an autonomous space, independent from the Church).
4. According to Mabel Moraña, the voices Sor Juana gives expression to are powerful tools: “a través de las voces ficticias, en una ventriloquia que al tiempo que asegura el lugar del sujeto emisor, le permite una proyección simbólica a través de voces que canalizan un discurso transgresivo, de reivindicación del marginado, e impugnación de la autoridad” (106) (Through fictitious voices, in a ventriloquy that ensures the place of the speaking subject, she is afforded a symbolic projection through other voices that channel a transgressive, vindicating, or authority-rebutting discourse).
5. George Antony Thomas underscores the importance of reconsidering her traditionally overlooked occasional poetry (“Politics” 1).
6. The poems must be read as a codependent, dialogic interface in order to reach their maximum potency.
7. Thomas, unlike other modern critics, recognizes the value of Sor Juana’s “occasional poetry” as a legitimizing endeavor: “By inventing the circumstances for a poem or utilizing the official occasion for her own poetic digressions, she is able to create a vehicle for her voice. The genre becomes an ideal mode for her own self-representation and a means to negotiate a textual space for a woman writing” (“Nunca” 5).
8. Méndez Plancarte also dismisses other potential candidates: “No así en el Conde de la Granja (cfr. núms. 48 bis y 50), que nunca pisó esta tierra; ni en el santafereño Alvarez de Velasco Zorilla (cfr. lo anot. a los núms. 61 y 48), quien tampoco vino jamás” (435n) (Neither the Count of La Granja nor the Santa Fe-born Alvarez de Velasco Zorilla ever stepped foot in the New World).
9. Cummins examines poetic debates in the fifteenth century (“preguntas y respuestas”; questions and answers).
10. One of the original poems to which Sor Juana replies is lost.
11. In a brilliant display of *topos humilitatus*, Sor Juana rejects yet accepts his praise: “Y no es humildad, porque / no es mi genio tan bendito; que no tenga más filautia / que cuatrocientos Narcisos”; “mas no es tan desbaratado, / aunque es tan desvanecido, / que presumo que merece / lo que nadie ha merecido” (141–44) (I am not speaking out of humbleness, because / I am not so blessed; I have more self-

- pride than four-hundred Narcissuses;/ however, I am not as vain / as to presume I am entitled/ to what nobody has deserved).
12. Alfredo A. Roggiano and Judith Kurfehs point out just one of the many struggles in which Sor Juana was embroiled: “The life and work of Sor Juana serve witness to that situation in a time and space in which she would flounder between ‘an infinite desire for knowledge’ and the acceptance of established knowledge as indubitable, of not proceeding beyond the known, of drowning her voice in reclusion and silence” (65).
 13. This hypothesis aligns with the autobiographic referentiality that Matías Barchino Pérez sees woven throughout her work (109).
 14. According to Naomi Miller, who speaks in the context of early modern England, female authored texts “elicit responses of outrage and vilification from male readers” (146).
 15. Juliana González explains, “Con su vida y con su creación Sor Juana reclama el fundamental reconocimiento de la igualdad en el ser hombre y la mujer” (50) (Through her life and her creations Sor Juana demands the fundamental recognition of equality between men and women).
 16. John G. Cummins associates *pullas* with “naïve questions and riddles (written by a single author rather than as a true debate, and generally included in a longer work)” (307).
 17. The image of the Phoenix calls to mind Lope de Vega, who, as Lucile K. Delano argues, figures as an overlooked influence in her poetry. She concludes, through careful, thematic comparisons, that Sor Juana knew Lope’s work well.
 18. Merrim maintains that “Sor Juana derives a considerable portion of her *Romance* no. 49 from a poem by a male baroque writer: from Francisco de Quevedo’s ‘La fénix’” (32). Many of the gentleman’s monstrous descriptions echo those elaborated by Quevedo: “que sola / haces la pájara vida” (1–2) (you alone / make the bird life); “tú, linaje de ti propia, / descendiente de ti misma” (13–14) (descendant of yourself); “y a puras perlas que sorbes, / tienes una sed muy rica” (23–24) (you drink pure pearls / with a rich thirst); “y la eterna hermafrodita” (56) (The eternal hermaphrodite); “ave de pocos amigos, / más sola y más escondida” (57–58) (bird of few friends / alone and hidden). Quevedo, according to Valentina Nider, wrote the poem to denounce the overuse of Phoenix imagery in literature of the era (163), with which Sor Juana seems to agree: “En fin, hasta aquí, es nonada, / pues nunca falta quien cante: *Daca el Fénix, toma el Fénix, / en cada esquina de calle*” (45–48) (So, up until here, it is nothing / as someone is always singing: *Here Phoenix, there Phoenix / on every street corner*).
 19. The poetic voice sets out with a stick and cape, two items inherent to pilgrims. The religious and spiritual nature of the journey is only intensified by the fact that Sor Juana inspires it. While travel of the time period focused on the experience of the traveler (his capacities and limits as well as a sense of self-understanding or exploration), Sor Juana is the agent that motivates him to do so. The fact that the *caballero* describes himself as a pilgrim whose destination is Sor Juana underlines the fact that she becomes a place (a pilgrim’s holy site) as well as a divine being (due to their relationship to God and saints).
 20. Bakhtin refers to this type of speech as “pseudo-objective motivation”: “the logic motivating the sentence seems to belong to the author, i.e., he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of his characters, or of general opinion” (305).
 21. The “tostada” refers to skin color but also to a toasted piece of bread dipped in wine (Covarrubias 971). The substitution of wine with cinnamon alludes to its supposed

- curative powers and reveals the play on words: “dos cucharadas restituye luego a los traspasados y amortecidos y confortan con increíble celeridad los estómagos fríos” (287) (two teaspoons soon restore the afflicted and faint and comfort cold stomachs with incredible quickness).
22. By stating that Sor Juana is legendary from Getafe to Egypt, the *caballero* establishes her world-renowned status, that she was a popular topic of conversation and that her artistry knew no geographical boundaries.
 23. Steven Hutchinson contends that “traveling continually exercises the soul in salubrious ways and educates better than any other method by offering a great diversity of human life for the soul to reflect on” (88). Regarding the idea of nocturnal reading, A. Roger Ekirch recently has studied alternate sleeping patterns before 1800 and their literary and historical references. Before the invention of lights, people would go to bed at sunset. He discovered that before the nineteenth century, humans would actually sleep in two phases overnight: slumbering for a few hours, awakening for two or three, and then returning to sleep until morning. One of his medical sources claimed that the best time for study and reflection was this conscious period between the first and second sleep. It would seem that this is when the *caballero* reads her ambitious poem, *Primero sueño*, which could, in this light, be translated as *First Sleep*.
 24. As Melanie Ord asserts, “After all, one should travel to learn something. Travel is repeatedly seen as an educational experience” (5). Hutchinson considers reading and traveling as alternate modes of acquiring knowledge (93).
 25. Although wonder, according to Greenblatt, is usually applied to what Descartes calls “first encounters” (20), this moment of recognition qualifies as such by default due to the gentleman’s newly-established appreciation of her work.
 26. Regardless of authorship, the poem nonetheless succeeds in outlining how monsters are born, live and die.
 27. According to Greer Johnson, “the playing and telling of jokes can be a way of proving one’s self, establishing one’s authority, and extending one’s influence over others.” (35).
 28. Cummins adds dimension to Sor Juana’s verse by pointing out that “skillful debating *por los consonantes* would be rewarded by poetic renown, and in the case of the lowlier poets, by more material benefits” (308). See Case, chapter three, on interpreting these types of textual digressions.
 29. Linda Egan, in her socioeconomic study of Sor Juana’s study poetry, comments briefly on Sor Juana’s intellectual isolation (10). These verses in particular attest to it.
 30. Merrim affirms that, “Should it be so desired, the learned woman would be celebrated as an exception to her sex, as prodigious, as a *rara avis*, as a freak” (30).
 31. Bakhtin tends to see poetry as a non-heteroglot genre: “Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse” (285). The fact that Sor Juana is able to infuse her poems with prose-like qualities underlines her role as an architect of unique dialogues.
 32. I would like to thank three colleagues for their generous contributions to this essay: to Emilie Bergmann, for her previous scholarship on Sor Juana and her bibliographic suggestions; to Mindy Badia, for her lightning-quick proofreading efforts; and to Yolanda Gamboa, my brilliant translation consultant on several of Sor Juana’s more challenging verses.

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