
As a graduate student, George Antony Thomas (University of Nevada, Reno), studied with Margarita Zamora (Wisconsin) and Karen Stolley (Emory), two mentors whose influence shaped his present book. Zamora trained him in Sor Juana’s political thought, while Stolley opened his eyes to her significant corpus of occasional verse, which Thomas defines as “ceremonial verse composed for state occasions” (2). He rightly states that this kind of poetry is often overlooked or dismissed by critics but makes a convincing case as to why it is important to treat her occasional verse with respect and renewed attention.

His book has an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix in which he groups Sor Juana’s occasional poetry into different categories and gives the poems the numbers assigned in the classic Alfonso Méndez Plancarte edition of her works. In the introduction, Thomas summarizes the main reasons why occasional verses were written and why they were especially important for women writers: it was a way to make money, as these verses were commissioned and remunerated by patrons, and it was a way to insert oneself into the patronage system, and to get published and known in social and literary circles (especially important for women, and even more so for cloistered nuns like Sor Juana, who could not move freely in the outside world). Finally, it provided an opportunity to express personal opinions ostensibly stated by a patron: “Her political aesthetics, the literary strategies she employs within the occasional mode, are ultimately a means of eschewing external obligations and transforming the occasion into a vehicle for her voice” (9).

The four chapters explore different roles, strategies, and voices that Sor Juana adopted in her occasional poetry. The first chapter (“The Wedding Preacher: Celebrating the Brides of Christ”) discusses poetry written on the occasion of a woman’s entry into a convent, not only by Sor Juana but by four other nuns as well, three of them Spanish and one Portuguese. Sor Juana wrote only one poem, letra 363, on the profession of a nun; Méndez Plancarte’s notes on this poem show how popular these
“profession” poems also were with contemporary male writers. Thomas pairs the four separate parts of the *letra* with poetry written by each of the other nuns in question. Sor Marcela de San Félix, Lope de Vega’s illegitimate daughter, is well known, but, if possible, I would have liked to have known more about the level of education of the other three nuns. The inclusion of these other nuns’ voices places Sor Juana into a wider Iberian context. Many of their verses were playful, ironic, and in one case even scatological, strategies in which Sor Juana was well versed herself.

Chapter 2 (“The Poet of Empire: Imperial Ceremony and *Imitatio Horatii*”) I found especially interesting in that Thomas, building on prior studies by Zapién Herrera and Gabriel Méndez Plancarte, not only documents the influence that the Roman poet Horace had on Sor Juana’s work but stresses important personal parallels in their lives. Both came from humble beginnings (Horace’s father was a slave), yet both had an excellent education as well as great intellect and talent. Horace was an expert in using occasional verse to create a distinctive poetic persona and, by evading what his patron directly asked of him, often managed to invert the patron-client power relationship, strategies which can also be found in Sor Juana’s poetry. The best example of her celebration of an important public spectacle is the *Neptuno alegórico* (*Allegorical Neptune*) the verses that she composed to mark the arrival in 1680 of the Marquises of La Laguna. In them, rather than extolling the overseas empire, she called attention to local issues such as constant flooding in the city and the need to finish construction of the cathedral.

Chapter 3 (“The Chronicler of Self: Flattery Will Get You Somewhere”) foregrounds the verse epistle, of which Sor Juana wrote a great many and to many different patrons. Thomas chooses three of these: Fray Payo Enríquez de Rivera, the archbishop-viceroy who ruled Mexico during Sor Juana’s early years (1673–80); her great friend and benefactress the Marquise of La Laguna (1680–88); and the Countess of Galve (1688–96). Whereas Sor Juana was on friendly and comfortable terms with the first two patrons, her relationship with the third was fraught. In the *Neptuno alegórico*, in which Sor Juana voiced local concerns, the nun pleaded with Fray Payo for permission from Spain to let local archbishops administer the sacrament of Confirmation, a sore subject with the Creole
This poem to the Marquise of La Laguna is one of scores that she composed for her: here the pregnant vicereine is craving walnuts, which the nun sends her, simultaneously thanking her benefactress for the gift of a feathered crown, formerly worn by Aztec monarchs. As Thomas points out (70), this exchange of personal gifts recalls the system of tributes that the Indians had to pay, first to other tribes and then to the Spaniards. To the prickly Countess of Galve the nun sent a laudatory poem accompanied by two typically Mexican gifts: embroidered shoes and chocolate, but the tone of these verses is tense, ironic, and, as Alessandra Luiselli has noted, even insubordinate. In his analysis of other laudatory verse epistles, Thomas demonstrates how deftly Sor Juana also used the gambit of personal digression to transform “vacuous praise into an ideal mode of self-promotion” (80).

In Chapter 4 (“The Court Advisor: Queenship and Kingship in Occasional Works”), Sor Juana joins a number of Spanish and European women (including the late medieval Frenchwoman Christine de Pizan) who offered monarchs advice on how best to govern. These manuals of governance, called speculum principis (Mirror for Princes), constitute a genre with ancient roots. Since Sor Juana lived in Mexico, she tended to address the viceroys as her princes, but on one occasion she wrote a poem to Queen Mariana of Austria, widow of Philip IV and regent of Spain, who was unpopular in Spain and faced many challenges to her power. Thomas’s analysis of the historical background to this poem is particularly enlightening. He also notes that Sor Juana tended to feminize this genre by addressing a number of vicereines as sources of peacemaking and pardon. In another variation, she cleverly addresses one poem to the Marquis of La Laguna’s toddler son, thus indirectly speaking to the father, in an ultimately failed plea to pardon a condemned man, once again showing that “commissioned or occasional works were a gender-appropriate means of expounding upon political issues” (94).

In the conclusion (“The Political Aesthetics of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz”), Thomas summarizes the strategies that Sor Juana had used in the previous chapters and also shows how she included them all in her famous prose treatise (also an occasional piece), “The Reply to Sor Filotea” (1691) (also translated as The Answer): satire and parody, the influence of Horace,
self-fashioning and digression, and her catalogue of illustrious women, which includes several queens.

Thomas has been working on this topic for some time, seeing that this book grew out of his dissertation and several subsequently published articles. I only wish the editing had been more careful since there are multiple unnecessary errors that a diligent editorial eye should have caught. Some are typos or grammatical errors: “the epitaphs that Sor Juana’s wrote for King Philip IV” (42); some are misspellings: he uses *topus* for *topos* and states that a convent was required to “horde” its food (33); here and there words are left out of sentences; a proper name is not anglicized correctly: St. Gregory “Nacianceno” (73, n.24) should be called St. Gregory of Nazianzus or St. Gregory Nazianzen. Thomas refers to Christine de Pizan as a “courtesan” (82), which she was not — a lady of the court, yes, a courtesan, no. Mexican art historian Alma Montero Alarcón is erroneously referred to throughout as “Norma.” Some translations are not accurate, as when he translates “ratones” as “rats” (62), or “bien cortadas / plumas” as “well-cut plumes” when the reference clearly refers to “quills” (this also occurs on p. 79). Sometimes he gets it very right, though, as when he renders “subir a vuestras plantas / es intento tan altivo” as “to rise to your feet / is a daring feat.” (74)

In spite of these errors, I like this book: it is concise, interdisciplinary, well-written and researched, and with excellent transitions from one chapter to another. I like the way Thomas begins each chapter with an interesting anecdote that at first may seem peripheral but is then skillfully woven in to provide a wider context for the specific poems discussed in each chapter. His attention to this overlooked aspect of Sor Juana’s poetic oeuvre is a welcome addition to the fields of women’s studies, literature, and cultural studies.

Nina M. Scott
University of Massachusetts, Amherst