

Sor Juana Or, The Traps of Faith, by Octavio Paz.

Certain classics serve as seminal contributions to the study of an individual, a literary creation or an era. It is rare when all three converge in the same work. Such is the "intellectual landmark" (in the words of Carlos Fuentes) *Sor Juana, Or, The Traps of Faith*, by Octavio Paz, his sweeping historical study cum biography cum literary criticism of Latin America's first great poet, the seventeenth-century nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Resurrected in the twentieth century after three hundred years of silence, Sor Juana has attained the iconic force of a Frida Kahlo. Her path from illegitimate prodigy to court favorite to nun to intellectual celebrity and finally to victim of an ideological and misogynistic Church has been the stuff of numerous studies. What Paz achieved, however, is the standard against which all works must be measured in the breadth, depth and sheer exuberance of his portrait, both of Sor Juana and her time.

Early on Paz defines the object of biography, which "is to convert the remote person into a more or less intimate friend." In this he succeeds admirably. Moreover, he provides a deeper understanding of the society that formed her and in which she moved, a society on the brink of the modern era but one which shuttered itself against the forces of the Enlightenment and tread lightly in the corridors of the Spanish Inquisition. That Sor Juana, a woman and a nun, should have shone so brightly in this masculinized world is the key to her "compelling vitality." As Paz declares, "few beings are as alive as she—after being buried for centuries."

To unearth Sor Juana, Paz reconstructs not only the seventeenth-century world in which she navigated but also the intellectual and historical precursors to that world. We cannot understand New Spain without pondering the "divisions and interruptions" that marked its trajectory from Conquest to viceregency. We cannot interpret its actions without understanding the framework of court, Church and university under which it operated. We cannot trace its intellectual currents without an investigation of their roots in Platonic dualism, mythology, Scholasticism, and the part the Counter-Reformation played in the sphere of ideas. We cannot appreciate its rituals without an introduction to the "neo-medieval" belief systems of the day, rife with allegory and metaphor. We cannot breathe life into Sor Juana until we breathe life into her era, and this Paz accomplishes with dizzying descriptions of the pageantry of court life and popular celebrations, with analyses of Baroque sensibility, and erudite wanderings into areas as diverse as Arabic erotica and seventeenth-century "Egyptomania".

Interwoven throughout are brilliant analyses of Sor Juana's oeuvre. This includes amatory poems and allegorical plays in addition to the major works, *First Dream* and the *Response*, both a "reflection on the solitary adventures of the mind" that in Paz's opinion presage a modern sensibility in literature.

In the same way Paz dissects an era, he places Sor Juana on the examining table, but he does so with affection and respect. Sor Juana is not a dry pile of bones but a living woman in all her complexity. Paz helps us to understand her sometimes perplexing choices. (Why would a beautiful, sought-after favorite of the court abandon her position and enter a convent at the age of twenty? Why when she had achieved fame and fortune did she allow herself to be subjugated by the Church and turn to self mortification?) He both praises and debunks other critics' interpretations and supports his views with

exhaustive research and penetrating insights. He shuns facile interpretations and instead weaves a complex tapestry that ties in her origins, her intellectual capacity, her choices as a woman in a masculine world and her psychological predisposition. Throughout he urges the reader to keep Sor Juana in her context and not impose anachronistic interpretations on her life and work. Those who would make a modern feminist icon of her would do well to heed his advice.

This book would lend itself to graduate-level study. While selections could be assigned to undergraduate students in Latin American studies, history or literature, in its entirety it would be challenging for those lacking some knowledge of historical, philosophical and literary currents across time. Having said that, it is of enormous value as a comprehensive study of Sor Juana, her age and work as well as a prime example of the writing of the author himself, in literary critic Harold Bloom's opinion, one of the "one hundred exemplary creative minds in history."

Jeanne Belisle Lombardo

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