

The *loa*: One Aspect of the Sorjuanian Mask

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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—poet, prose writer and dramatist—was not the first colonial Spanish American author to write *loas*, but her efforts are superior to those of other Hispanic American writers.¹ Most of Sor Juana's *loas* are refined examples of the genre and have a sophistication which permits them play status. This assessment of her *loas* can be substantiated by comparing them to those of her predecessors in Spanish America such as Fernán González de Eslava and to the *loas* of Agustín de Rojas Villandrando, and others, written in Spain prior to Calderón. Calderón, who began producing *loas* in 1650, and later Sor Juana, writing in a similar fashion, changed the *loa* from a short, simple monologue or dialogue to a longer form having all the trappings of drama. Although scholars believe that hundreds of *loas* were written in Spanish America during the seventeenth century, only eighteen from that period are extant (AMP, p.6). Since all of the eighteen remaining seventeenth-century *loas* are by Sor Juana, she is now considered the most prolific *loa* writer of Spanish America.²

However, the drama of Sor Juana has yet to receive the critical and popular acclaim it deserves. It is not generally known or remembered that Sor Juana, having written 20,350 lines of drama and 22,250 lines of poetry, composed almost as much drama as she did poetry.³ Nor is it remembered that she greatly improved the use of the literary echo-device, that certain elements of her poetry, such as the *encontradas correspondencias* or triangular antitheses, are found in a more complex and developed manner in her drama, and that in her drama she employed techniques similar to those popularized later by the Italian playwright, poet and novelist Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936). The lack of this knowledge has led twentieth-century readers to have a generally myopic view of Sor Juana's total production. Her dramatic skills complement and compete favorably with her poetic talents. For that reason, Sor Juana should be considered not only in terms of the lyre but also of the mask, with special attention to her *loas*, which comprise eighteen of the twenty-six extant dramatic pieces that she wrote.

Loas can be divided into two groups: those that precede a work written in a longer form and those that are independent. The majority of the works in this genre, both in Spain and in Spanish America, were written to enhance a following longer piece. It is of special note, therefore, that thirteen of the eighteen *loas* by Sor Juana are independent.

The eight *loas* of Fernán González de Eslava are examples of the non-independent *loa*.⁴ These works, as is true with many early Spanish *loas*, are not written expressly for the following play but are actually integrated into it. That is, they are not really separate plays but rather an initial speech of a *coloquio*, the dramatic form used by Eslava. The *loa* for Eslava's *Coloquio Primero*, for example, titled simply *Loa al virrey*, is followed by the directions "comienza la obra," apparently to leave no doubt that the *loa* is over and the major piece will begin. The *loa* for *Coloquio Trece*, which has no title, begins "Sale el Merecimiento a decir la loa al virrey." It too leads directly into the *coloquio*. In contrast, the Sorjuanian *loa* can often stand alone as a separate dramatic work.⁵

The difficulty of defining the *loa* is parallel to that of defining the *auto sacramental*. As Alfonso Méndez Plancarte says of the *auto*, the definition of the *loa* is a "definición imposible." The problem of giving a strict definition to the *loa* arises from the genre's long history of thematic variety and from the fact that each author defines and uses the *loa* according to his own purpose and need. The most tenable approach is through a composite definition based on a consideration of the characteristics of a number of *loas* of all types from several centuries. The pre-1650 *loa* can be defined as a brief one-act work generally written in verse. Although the early *loa* is usually a monologue, it occasionally is a dialogue between two characters. In this brief dramatic act the *echador de loas* requests silence and asks for pardon for any error in the theme treated in the play or for a shortcoming of the author or the actors in its composition and presentation. The *loa* praises persons and even towns. It also presents the plot of the following work, or by suggestion directs the thoughts of the audience to a key idea in it. Often times the *loa* is a "pre-show" in the sense that it improves the mood of the audience by provoking laughter and general good will. With regard to this aspect of the pre-1650 *loa*, Jean-Louis Flecnikoska offers a valid insight into the genre and into the character who recites the lines, when he asserts that the *loa* and the character serve as the "embajador del auto" to the spectators.⁶ Flecnikoska surmises that the very important "echador de loa" must have been a person of special talents, of ". . . presencia física, dotes mímicas, extremada facilidad verbal, (y) natural simpatía" (pp. 67-68) in order to have accomplished his objective successfully.

The independent *loa*, including the majority of those by Sor Juana, is not to be considered in the light of the last two parts of the previous definition (i.e., the plot summary and "pre-show" aspects) because it is complete in itself and not prefatory. The post-1650 *loas* by Sor Juana and Calderón contain dramatic elements that elevate them to play or drama status. In the structure of the Calderonian *loa* N.D. Shergold sees the same imagery, the same action, the same equilibrium of opposites, and the same grouping of characters that are found in the *auto*.⁷ He also finds that symbolism has the

same role in both the Calderonian *loa* and the *auto*. The *loas* of Sor Juana have all the characteristics of those of her peninsular counterpart. They serve as a preface when they precede longer works but are brief dramatic pieces when they are independent.

The origin of the Spanish/Spanish American *loa* can be traced to the prologues in Greco-Latin drama. Occasionally the works of Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes have a prologue presented by a character or god from the play which follows. The six prologues of Plautus also contain elements found in *loas*.⁸ A primitive example of what was to become the Hispanic *loa* can be found in the dramatic production of Spain's leading playwrights of the sixteenth century. The first *loa* of the Spanish theatre is attached to Juan del Encina's *Egloga de Plácida y Victoriano* (1513). Other early Spanish playwrights who used *loas* are Bartolomé de Torres Naharro, Lope de Rueda (some of his *pasos* were actually *loas*), and Juan de la Cueva.

Basing his decision on the popularity of the genre and the increased demand for works in it, Agustín de Rojas Villandrando became a professional *loa* writer and published forty *loas* in *Viaje entretenido* (1604). Significant evidence of the popularity of the *loa* appeared just before the publication of the collection by Agustín de Rojas when Luis Alfonso de Caravallo treated the genre in *Cisne de Apolo* (1602).⁹ Emilio Cotarelo y Mori says, but without any examples or explanation, that in this critical work Alfonso de Caravallo made recommendations for the *loa* and classified the various kinds (Cotarelo, p. xxiii). Cotarelo also classified the *loas* in 1911, placing them in five distinct categories: 1) the *loa sacramental* which precedes the *Auto sacramental*; 2) the *loa al nacimiento de Cristo, a Nuestra Señora y a los santos*; 3) the *loa de fiestas reales*; 4) the *loa para casas particulares* and 5) the *loa de presentación de compañías*. In addition to these five classes, I would suggest two additional categories: 1) the *loa profana* which precedes a secular play such as a *comedia* and 2) the *loa independiente*. The title of the anonymous work *Loa para cualquier auto* (c. 1570) suggests that this *loa* had subject matter which made it independent from whatever *auto* it might accompany. Thus, it seems to be an early example of the independent *loa*. Sor Juana, however, wrote a number of works that can clearly be classified as independent, especially those written on the occasion of an important person's birthday.

Although use of the *loa* declined during the early decades of the seventeenth century, it is of note that perhaps the two greatest writers in this genre—Calderón and Sor Juana—were to write *loas* after 1650, giving it new life, increasing its literary importance, and elevating its stature. Although Sor Juana never commented on her *loas* in any of her works, Calderón expressed his attitude toward the genre through the allegorical character Historia in *La siembra del señor* (1655). Historia queries, “¿Pues cómo ha de introducirse sin *Loa el Auto?*”¹⁰ Calderón favored the genre and can be credited with reviving the sacramental *loa* in Spain. Sor Juana performed an analogous function in Mexico, where she restored the profane *loa* and made a significant contribution to the development of the independent *loa*.

To date there have been only five studies devoted to the *loa*. These are by Emilio Cotarelo y Mori (1911), Joseph A. Meredith (1928), Alfonso Méndez Plancarte (1955), F. García Pavón (1964) and Jean-Louis Fleckniakoska

(1975).¹¹ Information about the *loa* is found primarily in the introductions and prologues to these works. The one exception, and the study most nearly devoted to criticism of the *loa*, is the book by Flechniakoska. Even there, however, almost half of the work is made up of the texts of thirteen Spanish *loas* and no reference is made to the Spanish American use of the form.

There are fewer studies still that treat specifically the *loa* of Sor Juana.¹² Critics who discuss her drama have almost exclusively limited their studies to her *comedia* and her *auto sacramental*, leaving the *loa* virtually unstudied. One of the few sources for information on the *loa* of Sor Juana is the introduction by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte to the *Obras completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Autos y loas* (1955). The Méndez Plancarte introduction is valuable for its general information on the peninsular *auto* and *loa sacramental* and for its treatment of Sor Juana's efforts in the two genres.

Critics writing more recently, such as Anthony M. Pasquariello, tend to discuss the Sorjuanian *loa* as a minor genre of questionable literary value. Pasquariello concludes that "The best that can be said for the *loas* of Sor Juana is that they were less strained than most of the eighteenth-century efforts with their staggering multitude of mythological and allegorical characters, their complex elaboration of metaphors, and a versification which startles the reader with its twists and turns for effect" (AMP, p. 9). Gerard Flynn in the Twayne series critical study of Sor Juana also finds the Sorjuanian *loa* to be of little literary consequence. However, in the preface to his study Flynn states that he has not closely examined the *loas*.¹³ This qualification should be remembered in order to keep Flynn's criticism of the Sorjuanian *loa* in proper perspective. For example, his lack of careful consideration of Sor Juana's *loas* is apparent when he says that her *loas* were written in honor of celebrities' birthdays. This statement is only partially accurate; six, or one-third of Sor Juana's *loas*, were not written for such an occasion. Flynn mentions just five of the eighteen *loas* and adequately discusses only two—those accompanying *Los empeños de una casa* and *El Divino Narciso*.

Since the scope of this brief article will not allow a full consideration of all eighteen *loas* by Sor Juana, the following discussion will focus on some aspects of Sor Juana's most noteworthy pieces.

In the first group of *loas*—those that precede an *auto* or *comedia*—are the three sacramental *loas* for the *autos* titled *El mártir del Sacramento*, *San Hermenegildo*, *El centro de José*, and *El Divino Narciso*. These three *loas*, besides being sacramental, are also similar in that each one treats the discovery and conquest of the New World, the subsequent need to convert the Indians to Catholicism, and finally, the resulting theological problems created by the joint military and religious conquest. The *loa* for *El mártir del Sacramento*, *San Hermenegildo* concerns the *Non plus ultra* and *Plus ultra* issue. The subject is treated in two different scenes of a play-within-a-play. The characters of the first part of the interior play, which constitutes scene iii, are Hercules and his soldiers. The group, acting out the ancient geographical myth, erects a column at the Strait of Gibraltar and proclaims "Non plus ultra, ¡Aquí acaba el universo!" Scene iv consists of a brief discussion about the preceding scene. The second part of the interior play, which is set in the New World in a period more contemporary to Sor Juana, is acted out in scene v. Amid the noise of

drums and clarion is heard the shout, "¡Que hay más mundos, que hay *Plus ultra!*, . . . y ya venimos de verlos!" as Columbus and his soldiers arrive. The *loa* for *El cetro de José* elucidates the theological and moral problems arising from the idolatry of the Indians, their practice of human sacrifice, their marriage system and their conversion to Catholicism. In the *loa* for *El Divino Narciso* Sor Juana alludes to the moral issue of the *justa guerra* and compares Catholicism with the paganism practiced by the Aztecs. The third *loa* ends with the assurance that the Indians will be converted to Catholicism, thus completing the third part of the tripartite goal of the Spaniards: discovery, conquest, conversion. Two more *loas* in the first category are those accompanying the comedias titled *Los empeños de una casa* and *Amor es más laberinto*, but the brevity of this study and the limited dramatic value of these two plays precludes a discussion of them.

The remaining thirteen of Sor Juana's *loas* are all independent. One is classified as religious and twelve as secular. Since all but one *loa* in the secular group are written in celebration of a birthday, eleven will be termed "Birthday *Loas*." Six of the Birthday *Loas* are in honor of the birthdays of different individuals, while the remaining pentad, entitled *Loa a los años del rey*, and differentiated by roman numerals I-V, honors Carlos II. Insight into Sor Juana's method of composition can be gleaned from a look at some aspects that the plays of the pentad have in common. Allusions to Greco-Latin mythology are found in *loas* IV and V; the Pirandello-like technique is employed in *loas* II and III; the four element imagery is used in *loas* I and V; and the echo/echo-device is found in *loas* I, IV and V. In *loa* II, the Pirandello-like technique is found in the closing lines of the *loa* when the characters leave off their appointed roles and discuss the play that will follow. One character suggests that the audience is tired of the *loa* and the *comedia* should begin. Another character explains that this is not possible because the actors who play the *damas* are busy at the moment. Plebe, the first character to speak, responds that since Majestad, Lealtad and Naturaleza (who have just acted in the *loa*) are dressed as ladies and since all three know the Calderonian *comedia* to be staged after the *loa* is finished, they can play the parts of the three *damas*—Cintia, Libia and Ismenia respectively. After this brief parenthesis, the *loa* action is resumed and the work quickly ends. A very brief example of the Pirandello-like technique is found also in the closing lines of *loa* III. The character who acted the part of Sol and the one who played the role of Cielo, now as individuals of reality and not characters of the fiction they have created, discuss their respective roles. Since the use of the Ptolemaic-Scholastic theory of the four regions of the elements—earth, air, fire and water and the echo-device are combined in *loas* I and V, an example from the first play will suffice to illustrate the two aspects under consideration.

Sor Juana incorporates all but two minor characters in scene v in which the four elements and the echo-device is used. The seventy-six line scene is divided into six parts, each of which is headed by Fuego, Aire, Agua, Tierra, Cielo and Amor. The echoes in each part are given by Música. In addition, each section, that is designated here for clarification A-F, is composed of one sentence broken up into twelve parts. A reproduction of the section by Aire, for example, will demonstrate how the sentence is used. The underlined words

are the echoes, which it should be noted, not only help complete the sentence but do so in an unusual and aesthetically appealing manner. The complete sentence is: "El Aire os rinda, de su esfera, graves, *Aves*, y, repetidos en los troncos huecos, *ecos*, que den, a militares instrumentos, *alientos*; y porque seáis, del mundo conocido, *sonido*." Then Aire says, "Sólo en vuestra alabanza repetido, el clarín de la Fama rompa el viento pues tenéis, en su diáfano elemento." Music then provides the recapitulation of the preceding echoes—*Aves*, *Ecos*, *Alientos* and *Sonido*—that completes the echo-device which is composed of a series of echoes that usually answer a question posed in the preceding line or reinforce a statement and also usually serve a similar function when they are gathered in the recapitulation line. Music plays an important role in all five of the *loas*, serving mainly as the vehicle for the echo and echo-device.

While all of the *loas* of Sor Juana have merit, two are outstanding. The first, the *loa* for *El Divino Narciso*, has received some critical attention, but the other, *Loa en las huertas donde fue a divertirse la Excelentísima Señora Condesa de Paredes, Marquesa de la Laguna* from the *Birthday Loas*, until this study has been neglected. Because the *Loa en las huertas*, written and performed between 1680 and 1683, is the lesser know of the two, the following discussion is dedicated principally to it.

The basic source of this *loa* is Book XIV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Greco-Latin element which is a constant in the drama of Sor Juana is present in the four major characters named Flora, Céfiro, Vertumno and Pomona. The action of the play develops along two levels of conflict—one physical and the other psychological. Música's announcement that today the orchard will be blessed with the arrival of the most beautiful goddess initiates a conflict between Flora and Pomona, each of whom considers herself the most beautiful. This psychological conflict between the women becomes physical when each of the respective lovers swears to defend his lady's claim. At the height of the physical battle Ninfa appears and explains that the most beautiful is the sublime María Luisa, the vicereine. Acquiescing to this decision, Pomona and Flora immediately offer their praises to the countess. The *loa* ends quickly, as is common practice in the *loa*, by requesting pardon for the defects of the work and by offering praises to important people in the audience. A unique aspect of this play, which distinguishes it from Sor Juana's other *loas* in praise of important people, is that the vicereine is not mentioned until near the end. The reader/spectator, even if he concludes from the title that the vicereine will eventually become the object of praise, still is held in suspense during the conflict.

Rather than having the usual monologue or dialogue form that was common in the pre-1650 *loa*, Sor Juana's *Loa en las huertas* is a brief play containing several characters and possesses all of the traits required of a longer drama. For example, there is conflict which is basic to drama, and the constant dramatic tension among the various personages that ultimately results in the surprising climax. Finally, Sor Juana skillfully maintains an equilibrium between the sets of opposing forces, creating a well-structured play. In conclusion, Sor Juana's drama has been considered incidental to her poetry since the publication of the first collection of her works, *Inundación*

Castálida (1689) in which, ironically, half of her *loas* were first printed. By ignoring her drama, and particularly the *loas*, critics have failed to appreciate this exceptional woman as a total writer. In addition to creating fine poetry, Sor Juana made significant contributions in drama. She, as did Calderón, expanded the simple early form of the *loa*, elevating it to that of a brief one-act play. She is singularly important in the development of the independent *loa* form in Latin America. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has made her mark in drama and deserves to be considered in terms not only of the lyre but also of the mask.

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NOTES

1. I reached this assessment after careful analysis of Sor Juana's *loas* while writing a doctoral dissertation on her theatre. Essentially the same conclusion was reached by Anthony M. Pasquariello, "The Evolution of the *loa* in Spanish American," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/2 (Spring 1970), 5-19.

2. Pasquariello mentions, in his study given above, the following authors that composed *loas*: Eslava (8 *loas*), Sor Juana (18 *loas*), Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo (4 *loas*), Fray Francisco del Castillo (2 *loas*), Antonio Fuentes del Arco (1 *loa*), Jacinto de Buenaventura (1 *loa*) and two anonymous *loas*.

3. Based on a count of the *Obras completas* edited by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte.

4. José Rojas Garcidueñas, ed., *Fernán González de Eslava, Coloquios espirituales y sacramentales*, tomo 1 (México: Editorial Porrúa, S. A., 1958), 27 ff.

5. Refer to the appendix for the titles of the independent *loas* by Sor Juana.

6. Jean-Louis Flechniakoska, *La loa* (Madrid: Sociedad General Española de Librería, S. A., 1975), 52.

7. N. D. Shergold, *A History of the Spanish Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 465.

8. George E. Duckworth, *The Complete Roman Drama* (New York: Random House, 1942).

9. Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Colección de entremeses, loas, bailes, jácara y mojigangas* (Madrid: Casa Editorial Bailly-Bailliere, 1911), xxiii. Future references to this study will be indicated by Cotarelo and the appropriate page number.

10. Angel Valbuena Pratt, ed., *Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca: Obras completas*, vol. III: *Autos sacramentales* (Madrid: Aguilar, S. A., 1952), 1240.

11. Joseph A. Meredith, *Introito and Loa in the Spanish Drama of the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928); F. García Pavón, *Teatro menor del siglo XVII* (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, S. A., 1964); see also footnotes 6 and 9 of the present study.

12. The following works contain some limited information on Sor Juana's *loa*. The Pasquariello study given in footnote 1; the Flynn study given in footnote 13; Ezequiel Chávez, *Ensayo de psicología de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Barcelona: Casa Editorial Araluze, 1931), 194 and 199; and Anita Arroyo, *América en su literatura* (San Juan: Editorial Universitaria, 1967), xv.

13. Gerard Flynn, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971), no page number.

A Categorization of the Eighteen Extant Sorjuanian *Loas*

- I. *Loas* that precede a longer work
 - A. Religious (Sacramental) *Loas*
 1. *Loa* for *El Divino Narciso*
 2. *Loa* for *El mártir del Sacramento, San Hermenegildo*
 3. *Loa* for *El cetro de José*
 - B. Secular *Loas*
 1. *Loa* for *Los empeños de una casa*
 2. *Loa* for *Amor es más laberinto*
- II. Independent *Loas*
 - A. The Eleven "Birthday *Loas*"
 1. The Pentad of Carlosian *Loas*
 2. *Loa a los años de la Reina Nuestra Señora, Doña María Luisa de Borbón*
 3. *Loa a los años de la Reina Madre, Doña Mariana de Austria, Nuestra Señora*
 4. *Loa a los felices años del Señor Virrey Marqués de la Laguna*
 5. *Loa al año que cumplió el Señor Don José de la Cerda, primogénito del Señor Virrey Marqués de la Laguna*
 6. *Loa a los años del Reverendísimo Padre Maestro Fray Diego Velásquez de la Cadena*
 7. *Encomiástico poema a los años de la Excelentísima Señora Condesa de Galvez*
 - B. Non-Birthday *Loas*
 1. Religious
 - Loa de la concepción*
 2. Secular
 - Loa en las huertas donde fue a divertirse la Excelentísima Señora Condesa de Paredes, Marquesa de la Laguna*