

ARTICLE

Was Sor Juana a Sphinx? Monstrosity and the Poetics of Dedication in Her Transoceanic *Enigmas*

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Abstract

This article explores Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's (1648–1695) strategic poetic approach, aimed at democratizing writing and knowledge among women during her period. It examines her engagement with the literary academy, Casa del Placer, believed to have included nuns from Portuguese convents and women of the nobility. Specifically, the study analyzes Sor Juana's final poetic work, the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* (1695), comprising twenty unanswerable poetic enigmas. In this collection, Sor Juana departs from individual lyric expression, a shift I call a “poetics of dedication,” advocating for a communal cultural identity centered on her persona's fame. Through this gesture, Sor Juana appropriates and challenges patriarchal narratives that labeled her as a “monster” due to her perceived exceptionalism. My article shows how, toward the end of her life, Sor Juana embraces and subverts discussions about her exceptional status and transatlantic identity, fostering a sense of transoceanic sorority among women writers of the colonial period.

Keywords: exceptionality; lyricization; enigmas; poetics of dedication; Global Hispanophone

Resumen

Este artículo profundiza en la estrategia poética de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), específicamente en su gesto orientado a democratizar la escritura y el conocimiento entre las mujeres de su tiempo. Se analiza su participación en la academia literaria Casa del Placer, que probablemente incluía monjas de conventos de Portugal y otras mujeres de la nobleza portuguesa. En particular, el estudio se centra en su última obra, los *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* (1695), una colección de veinte enigmas poéticos irresolubles. En esta obra, Sor Juana se aleja de la expresión lírica individual, lo que denomino una “poética de dedicación”, al abogar por una identidad cultural comunitaria basada en la fama de su figura. Con este gesto, Sor Juana se apropia y desafía las narrativas patriarcales que la calificaban de “monstruo” por su excepcionalidad percibida. El artículo muestra cómo, hacia el final de su vida, Sor Juana adopta y subvierte los debates sobre su estatus excepcional y su identidad transatlántica, promoviendo una sororidad transoceánica entre las escritoras del periodo colonial.

Palabras clave: excepcionalidad; liricización; enigmas; poética de la dedicación; hispanofonía global

Western culture has exhausted itself inventing female monsters.
—Lauren Elkin, *Art Monsters*

In his poetic parody “Sor Juana y otros monstruos: Una ponencia en verso” (2013), the Mexican poet Luis Felipe Fabre highlights the prevailing academic consensus surrounding the “monstrosity” of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (ca. 1648–1695).¹ As Fabre (2015, 5) notes, the famous colonial Hieronymite nun has consistently been associated with an aura of extraordinariness: “All the Sor Juana scholars concur that Sor Juana/was a monster.” To describe Sor Juana’s wit, Fabre avoids positive terms like *genius* or *famous* and opts for the more ambiguous *monster*, derived from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “prodigy,” precisely because it aptly symbolizes critics’ preoccupation with Sor Juana’s supposed exceptional nature.² Additionally, he ironically points out, the figure of the monster is the focal point for the critics’ dissensus, as “where they differ/is/on what kind of monster she was” (11). Building on the divergences among *sorjuanistas*, Fabre’s poem persistently poses variations of the question “What kind of monster was Sor Juana?” (13). These inquiries include “Was Sor Juana a phoenix?” (11) and “What kind/of monster is it whose power/resides in language?” (15). Such repetitions parodically mirror the relentless infatuation of Sor Juana scholars with defining her identity—an obsession that, as Lauren Elkin (2023, 16) suggests, generates new scholarship by perpetuating the Western tradition of “inventing female monsters.”

Fabre’s parody not only resonates with modern *sorjuanismo* but also aligns with the historical fixation of Sor Juana’s peers in both defining her persona and determining whether she was an exception to the norm.³ Ultimately, Sor Juana scholars “concur/with what was said/about Sor Juana by Sor Juana’s contemporaries” (9). However, through the poem, Fabre eventually arrives at a potential and plausible answer to the transhistorical question posed by Sor Juana’s critics, both past and modern:

What kind of monster was Sor Juana?
Enigma.
An enigma who poses enigmas.
...
What kind of monster poses enigmas?
A sphinx?
Was Sor Juana a sphinx?
Sor Juana scholars: I have here a topic for your next conference. (15)

This metacritical turn propels my article to explore further the enigmatic and monstrous aura attributed to Sor Juana’s identity.⁴ In response to Fabre’s challenge, I take up the

¹ Criticism’s focus on Sor Juana’s exceptionality was evident in Octavio Paz’s *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* and continues today. Veronica Grossi characterizes this view, calling Sor Juana an “icono de la anomalía” (qtd. in Ventarola 2017a, 7).

² The exploration of monstrosity is extensive and beyond this article’s scope. An excellent introduction to teratology is *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2020), which compiles essays by authors like Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Donna Haraway, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Jack Halberstam, and Patricia McCormack.

³ Asking if Sor Juana was a typical or an atypical nun, Asunción Lavrin (1999, 79) arrives at the following intriguing conclusion that summarizes her answer: “She was both at different times in her life. She did not appear to have an overpowering vocation for religious life, but she was a dutiful nun who adhered to the daily routine, fulfilled the conventual assignments given to her, obeyed her superiors, and formed bonds with her fellow sisters in religion.”

⁴ Before me, Sor Juana scholars like Stephanie Kirk and Nicholas Jones have engaged with Fabre’s poem in metacritical reflections on *sorjuanismo*. For a new direction in *sorjuanismo* that dialogues with Black studies, see Jones (2018).

gauntlet, aiming to build on the metaphor of late Sor Juana as a sphinx.⁵ Specifically, this article elaborates on what I call a “poetics of dedication” identified within her final work, the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* (1695). Sent from Mexico to Lisbon, this collection of twenty poetic riddles was addressed to a devoted audience—a conventual academy of Portuguese nuns and noblewomen who gathered to interpret Sor Juana’s poems as if she were a sphinx presenting them with enigmas.⁶ In turn, the collection of enigmas is preceded by a “homenaje a Sor Juana” (Sabat-Rivers and Rivers 1995, 677), featuring prose and verse compositions by eight Portuguese nuns connected to Sor Juana’s patron, the Countess of Paredes and former vicereine of Mexico. All these women were part of the so-called Casa del Placer. I argue that the *Enigmas*, inherently a transatlantic work, was intricately structured around the fundamental questions arising from the early modern debate on Sor Juana’s “monstrous persona” on both sides of the Atlantic.⁷ This heated debate was strategically wielded as a weapon, not only by the nuns and noblewomen of the Casa del Placer but also by Sor Juana herself. The collection’s organization had a ritualistic nature, revolving around the central theme of enigma and anchored in the ceremonial practice of presenting and resolving poetic riddles dedicated to Sor Juana. As I show in the following pages, the women of the Casa del Placer present her with the answers to the riddles in the form of poems, showcasing the fruits gathered from a book of enigmas that Sor Juana had dedicated to them initially. In other words, I contend that the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* is a collection in which Sor Juana strategically leveraged and magnified the enigmatic and exceptional qualities her contemporaries attributed to her. To support this claim, I first demonstrate how the figure of the enigmatic monster was imposed upon her by her male peers and then examine the ways Sor Juana employed this enigmatic aura in crafting her *Enigmas*.

My article emphasizes that early modern and colonial poetry served as a social practice expressing shared subjectivities (Sierra Matute 2021). Sor Juana’s *Enigmas* not only underscore the role of poetry as a practice articulating collective sensibilities but also delve deeper into her poetics of dedication. In this intricate framework, the nun’s relinquishment of personal agency transforms the lyrical poem into a manifestation that transcends individuality, embodying a collective “we” instead of an individual, lyric “I.” The poetics of dedication, in this case, serves as a transformative conduit, melding the distinct voices of the nuns into a unified expression. The subsequent evolution of this poetics takes on the character of a communal pursuit, wherein the shared interpretation of enigmas becomes a symbolically rich and ceremonious manifestation of intellectual devotion in the conventual academy. Consequently, the act of dedication goes beyond presenting poetry; it becomes a ritual that binds participants in a mutual pursuit of knowledge, thereby strengthening the thematic and structural unity of the collection.

Yes: Sor Juana was a monster⁸

Luis Felipe Fabre’s academic paper in verse is clearly founded on the well-established branch of Sor Juana studies that debates her as a “exotic, monstrous, New World marvel”

⁵ Fabre is not the only one to liken the Mexican nun to a sphinx. For instance, the Sor Juana scholar José Pascual Buxó (2006, 72) invokes this comparison when discussing the well-known debate about why Sor Juana seemingly stops writing at the end of her life.

⁶ These gatherings may have been metaphorical (as through epistolary exchange) or in person. Given the absence of historical documentation, we must take the presentiality of the meetings with a grain of salt (Munguía 2019, 30).

⁷ For an up-to-date discussion on how Sor Juana’s work intervenes in contemporary critical debates, including transatlantic studies, see Nogar (2024).

⁸ Verses of Fabre’s poem (9, 13, 21) serve as section headings for my paper, reflecting my view that Fabre’s intervention effectively captures the challenges inherent in studying the *Enigmas*.

(Echenberg 2023, 18). The poem dramatizes how, from Sor Juana's time to the present, criticism has relied on the figure of the enigmatic monster to build scholarship around her. Fabre transforms Sor Juana scholars like Stephanie Kirk, David Solodkow, and Margo Glantz into characters, adding a theatrical dimension to the academic discourse on her identity.⁹ However, many other critics have commented on the nun's identity.¹⁰ This article focuses on where discussions about enigma and her exceptionality intersect—an intersection Sor Juana herself exploits in crafting her *Enigmas*. For example, the nun has been described as “una de las figuras más importantes y enigmáticas de la literatura hispanoamericana” (one of the most important and enigmatic figures in Latin American literature; Ventarola 2017a, 7) and even “the ultimate Baroque monster, an inconceivable misbirth” (McSweeney 2017). She has also been subjected to literary monsterization, closely tied to her dimension as a popular icon (Hind 2017).¹¹ These characterizations highlight the mysterious aura attributed to Sor Juana in both literature and literary analysis, driven by the intersection of uniqueness and mystery, linking her figure to the obsessions of the baroque period and its fascination with both monsters and enigmas.¹² Indeed, the overlap between the discourses of monstrosity and enigma shapes the framework of Sor Juana studies.¹³

The practice of scrutinizing Sor Juana's life and body of work goes far beyond the contemporary scope of modern *sorjuanismo*. Its origins trace back to the alienating descriptions provided by her contemporaries, including a considerable number of Spanish “hombres doctos,” twenty ecclesiastic *letrados* who, from their learned chairs in Spain, expressed their opinions through legal texts, critiques, and laudatory poems, performatively endorsing the *Segundo volumen* of Sor Juana's works (Pérez González 2022, 200).¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, these texts engaged with the topos of Sor Juana's enigmatic aura, drawing analogies to the widely spread promise that the Spanish kingdom held of discovering valuable gold, treasures, and exotic materials suitable for extraction in the Americas.¹⁵ Similarly, the well-known mythical anecdote recounts a supposedly crucial moment in Sor Juana's youth when, at the age of seventeen, her intellect was challenged by a group of yet

⁹ Rivky Mondal's (2018) review of Fabre's poetry collection notes that “the conversion of Sor Juana into an academic curio can well be compared to the creation of a monster, engineered from fragments of fact and fiction.” Mondal suggests that Fabre explores a hypothetical scenario: “What if Sor Juana were an actual monster?” If she were a monster—a sphinx, I would add—she would devour the *sorjuanistas*.

¹⁰ Alongside the studies by Luciani (2004) and Lavrin (1999), many works attempt to decipher Sor Juana's monstrosity. As Fabre (2015) humorously notes, taking a stance on Sor Juana's monstrosity is a “rite of passage” for *sorjuanistas*—“there comes a paragraph/in the doctoral dissertation of every Sor Juana scholar/in which it becomes impossible to go on without admitting/that Sor Juana was a monster” (5–7). For instance, Octavio Páez Granados (2019) examines literary depictions of Sor Juana portraying her as “echo, siren, and sphinx, all of them highly seductive monsters” (165), but also as the “Phoenix of America” and the Gila (167). Bonnie Gasior (2008, 2014) also explores Sor Juana's monstrosity, examining it in her dialogic romances and collaborative theatrical works.

¹¹ For example, in her book *Mandibula* (2018), Mónica Ojeda refers to an unfinished fictional comic project, “*Sor Juana: zombies, vampiros y lesbianas*, que tenía como protagonista a la poeta y, como escenario, a un convento de monjas lesbianas *dominatrix* en donde se expandía, gracias a un *chac mool* y un ritual ancestral, un virus *zombienáhuatl*” (98).

¹² For further exploration of the early modern fascination with monsters, see Castillo (2010).

¹³ As Kirk (2016, 1) argues: “The enigmas of Sor Juana's life have fueled many studies as scholars analyze both her work and her limited biography in search of answers. [These enigmas] manifest as a distinctly Baroque phenomenon.” The writer's supposedly exceptional nature is expressed through the concept of enigma, extending the hermeneutic model of deciphering enigmas to the study of her life.

¹⁴ Among the twenty contributors who used the rhetoric of exceptionality in their preliminary texts for her *Segundo volumen*, Juan Navarro Vélez, a Qualifier of the Spanish Inquisition, depicted her as “aquel monstruo hermoso y agradable de los ingenios” (Navarro Vélez in Pérez González 2022, 214).

¹⁵ For the early modern obsession with riches, a driving force behind the Spanish Conquest, see Betancor (2017, 1–4) and Legnani (2020, 56–58).

another forty wise men—a test she successfully passed (Calleja 1996, 16–17). Although the authenticity of this story is uncertain, its popularity underscores a recurring theme in Sor Juana's life: From a young age, she was confronted with challenges to her intellect, often by men who doubted her and presented enigma-like tests to question her wit. Notably, this anecdote was documented by her first biographer, the Jesuit Diego Calleja, whose *Vida de Sor Juana* represents the earliest biographical approach to her work and forms the foundation of all subsequent discussions about her life (Pérez González 2022, 196).

Published as a prologue to the *Fama y obras póstumas del Fénix de México . . .* (1700)—the collection that solidified the myth of the nun as a literary monster—Calleja's biography begins with the most extreme scrutiny of Sor Juana's life: “Cuarenta y cuatro años, cinco meses, cinco días y cinco horas ilustró su duración al tiempo la vida de esta rara mujer” (13). By delineating her lifespan down to the hour, Calleja exerts control over Sor Juana's body.¹⁶ This enumeration emphasizes the level of surveillance imposed on Sor Juana and underscores the attempt to regulate her existence within extremely narrow temporal confines. Calleja concludes the sentence with the label “rara mujer.” The labeling, reminiscent of the Latin expression “rara avis,” further reinforces the perception of Sor Juana as a monstrous entity.¹⁷ Furthermore, with those echoes, Calleja anticipates a theme present throughout the whole biography, what he would have seen as “the New World strangeness of Sor Juana” (Dopico 2001, 213), a theme that was also discernible in the preliminary texts of the *Segundo volumen* and resonated in the *Fama y obras póstumas* itself. This motif hints at the contemporaneous Western perception of the Americas as an exotic and mysterious land. As Margo Echenberg (2023, 16) summarizes: “Her publications, her reputation as an American Tenth Muse and her negotiations with patrons and ecclesiastical hierarchs made Sor Juana a transatlantic celebrity in her own time. But so too did her oddity, her freakish exceptionality as a prodigy, a wonder of her sex and treasure of the feminized New World.” In this way, the intersection of discourses of monstrosity and enigma in Calleja's depiction highlights the rare nature of Sor Juana, subjecting her to intense examination and contributing to the construction of her identity as an enigmatic transatlantic figure—one with whom the nuns and noblewomen of the Casa del Placer actively engaged.

Instead of adopting a passive stance, I contend that Sor Juana actively embraced and reappropriated both the transoceanic reach of her works and the enigmatic aura attributed to her by her contemporaries. As Kirk (2021) has recently underscored, “her work bears explicit and implicit hallmarks of her Americanness, her gendered coloniality, her membership in a heterogeneous New World society, and a transatlantic and global consciousness fashioned by her status as an imperial subject” (25). Sor Juana's proactive engagement with her supposed exceptionality significantly influenced the development of her final poetry, particularly her *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer*. The *Enigmas* was her last work, and it should be understood as a “obra conventual, colectiva, devota y protectora de mujeres literatas de la época que conocían la obra de Sor Juana, y como lazo de unión entre mujeres de esos dos mundos” (Sabat-Rivers and Rivers 1995, 277). The fact that Sor Juana chose a transatlantic collection of enigmas to close her career is a strategic move, aligning with her efforts to challenge societal expectations.

Sor Juana leveraged the concept of the female monster in the *Enigmas* to enhance her portrayal of mystery and exceptionality. She did so by capitalizing on the moments in her

¹⁶ This discourse on control, as underscored by Patricia Saldarriaga (2006, 95), may indeed constitute one of the distinctive features defining colonial convent poetry, thus serving as a crucial interpretive element in the works of colonial nuns.

¹⁷ As Margo Echenberg (2023, 162) has shown, the motif of the *rara avis* was strategically utilized by several authors of the posthumous *Fama y obras póstumas* in homage to Sor Juana.

life when she faced public criticism—a constant theme throughout her existence.¹⁸ For instance, five years before she wrote her last work, Sor Juana underwent “careful scrutiny as a poet and as a woman” (Lavrin 1999, 61) during a heated exchange of accusations with the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz. Disguised as the nun “Sor Filotea,” the bishop advised Sor Juana to forsake her intellectual pursuits, deeming them unfitting for a devout woman.¹⁹ This epistolary exchange was an attempt to silence her. However, as Bárbara Ventarola (2017b, 27–28) has shown, rather than succumbing to discouragement in the face of these accusations, Sor Juana embraced her reputation for cleverness in her “Respuesta a Sor Filotea,” where she “aboga por el derecho femenino a la educación, a la enseñanza (sobre todo a otras mujeres) y a la participación en la esfera pública,” a mission that the *Enigmas* fully integrate. Given her supposed dual nature, Sor Juana was conceived by her contemporaries “as a ‘hybrid monster,’ a woman with ‘masculine intellect’” (Luciani 2004, 172). Although these characterizations may have been perceived as offensive by the nun, she chose to harness them throughout her life. For instance, in some poems, she ironically responds to several gentlemen who praise her masculine intellect and even directly request “que se volviese hombre.” In her reply, she declares:

Con que a mí no es bien mirado
que como a mujer me miren,
pues no soy mujer que a alguno
de mujer pueda servirle,
y sólo sé que mi cuerpo,
sin que a uno u otro se incline,
es neutro o abstracto, cuanto
sólo el alma deposite. (Cruz [ca. 1685] 1997, 62–63)

In this poem, the lyric “I” rejects an association with the masculine or feminine gender and instead claims a neutral gender, in another of the many examples of “gender nonconformity and dissonance in Sor Juana” (Fiol-Matta 2003, 346). The statement showcases Sor Juana’s witty response to societal expectations by emphasizing the neutrality of her identity, blurring the conventional boundaries between masculinity and femininity.²⁰ This deliberate embrace of hybridity highlights a defiance of traditional gender norms.²¹ She further elaborates on this gesture in her “Respuesta,” where she draws upon the classical tradition to assert the presence of a feminine intellect and suggests a close connection between *ingenio* and hermaphroditism (Ventarola 2017b, 28–29). Both assertions, offered in response to men, underscore that Sor Juana not only

¹⁸ Glantz (1995, 34–35) has pointed out that the preliminary texts to both her *Inundación castálida* (1689) and her *Segundo volumen* (1692) constitute a public staging of praises, emphasizing the exceptional nature of the nun. For a detailed analysis of paratexts in Sor Juana’s work, running parallel to her mythification, see Pérez González (2022, 193–244).

¹⁹ According to Lavrin (1999, 67), Sor Juana’s confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda, held a different perspective on the nun’s exceptional qualities: “For a Jesuit of that century, the combination of so many felicitous virtues in a woman was not a mistake of nature but a challenge to the church. Such perfection should be devoted to God rather than wasted in secular life.”

²⁰ To refer to Sor Juana in this article, I use the feminine pronouns *she* and *her* as those are the ones she uses in personal correspondence. However, her poetry presents a different case. Sor Juana’s poetic persona alternately leans toward the feminine or the masculine, as evidenced in the series of love poems known as “Rendidas correspondencias.” For a reflection on the alternating gender roles in her poetic persona, see Valencia (2019).

²¹ Sor Juana embraced hybridity both thematically and formally. For example, the play *Amor es más laberinto* features the Minotaur—a hybrid monster of a bull and a human—as its central figure. The play is also materially hybrid, co-written with Spanish friar Juan de Guevara. This play blends styles, genres, and cultural influences from American and Spanish literary traditions.

welcomed her renown for wit and intellect but also reclaimed the symbol of the enigmatic monster.²²

An enigma who poses enigmas

The *Enigmas ofrecidos a la soberana asamblea de la Casa del Placer* is a handwritten collection of twenty poetic riddles. Composed in the metrical form of the *redondilla*—four octosyllabic lines with consonant rhyme—all are posed in the form of a question. Each enigma begins with the interrogative “¿Cuál?” and follows an identical structure and a similar style.²³ For example, this is the first enigma:

¿Cuál es aquella homicida
que, piadosamente ingrata,
siempre, en cuanto vive, mata
y muere cuando da vida? (Cruz 2019, 287)

The collection concludes with an “Index de los sacrificios que ofrece la poetisa a los Sagrados oráculos que ilustrasen la oscuridad de los *Enigmas*” (Cruz 2019, 299), which enumerates twenty metrical forms—“una silva,” “una canción,” “unas liras” (299)—aligned with each of the twenty enigmas. The index encourages readers to employ designated metrical forms for the resolution of the respective enigmas.²⁴ For instance, the inaugural metrical form listed in the index, “un soneto” (299), aligns with the quoted enigma and, therefore, the riddle should be answered with a sonnet dedicated to the concept that resolves it.²⁵ Although scholars agree that it cannot be confirmed whether the enigmas were ever solved by the women of the Casa del Placer—any hypothetical texts containing the solutions have not survived—the “Index” demonstrates that the collection was conceived with the idea that Sor Juana’s *Enigmas* would act as a catalyst for generating poems in response to these twenty literary riddles, thereby fostering literary creation and exchange among women.

Often labeled as “poesía menor” or “poesía de circunstancias” (Martínez López 1968, 57), the *Enigmas* are one of the least studied works within Sor Juana’s literary corpus (Munguía 2019, 13). This collection of poetic riddles was discovered in the National Library of Portugal by Enrique Martínez López in 1968, yet it remained overlooked for three

²² Modern reclamations of the monster figure to underscore women’s agency are found in Marta Sanz (2018), Donna Haraway (1990), and Rosi Braidotti (1991, 1999). The monster has also been appropriated in trans and *travesti* resistance to neoliberal politics in Latin America, as Pearce (2020) shows. For the figure of the monster in the early modern and colonial periods, see Río Parra (2003) and Pueyo (2016). While Sor Juana wasn’t the only woman facing gender scrutiny and being associated with monstrosity in her era, her influence positioned her as a visible figure. Read from today’s perspective, she likely served as a spokesperson not only for herself but also for other women, nuns, and gender dissidents during the early modern and colonial periods (Gasior 2008, 2014). For further exploration of the early modern association between monstrosity and women’s bodies, see Brownlee (2015) and Dopico (2001).

²³ In this regard, the *Enigmas* adhere to a modification of the pattern outlined by Sebastián de Covarrubias in his *Tesoro de la lengua española* (1611, 244r): “En la proposición de los enigmas, se suele preguntar ‘¿qué es coscosa?’, por ‘¿qué es cosa y cosa?’, como si dijera ‘¿qué significa esta cosa propuesta?’” For Sor Juana’s reconfiguration of the rhetoric of Petrarchism through the concept of the enigma, see Grossi (2019).

²⁴ There is a long-standing debate about the solutions to the twenty enigmas. For an overview of this debate, see Sabat-Rivers and Rivers (1995, 681–84).

²⁵ Enrique Martínez López (1968) and Antonio Alatorre (1995) assumed that it was the readers themselves who should write the solutions in the form of poems, and this is the most widely accepted opinion. However, Yadira Munguía argues that, since it is not explicitly stated, it should not be taken for granted: the solutions might need to be found in other classical texts (Cruz 2019, 299). Some scholars suggest that the solutions might have been found in Sor Juana’s previous poems (Sabat-Rivers and Rivers 1995, 682). In any case, the enigmas were an intellectual challenge for the women of the Casa del Placer.

decades.²⁶ It was only in 1993 that Sergio Fernández transcribed them for publication in the newspaper *La Jornada Semanal*, and the inaugural critical edition, overseen by Antonio Alatorre, was not published until 1994. Although more academic works on the *Enigmas* are gradually emerging, they have yet to garner substantial scholarly attention, as they have often occupied a peripheral position in monographs about Sor Juana and have rarely assumed a central role as the main topic of academic books.²⁷ Beyond being Sor Juana's final work, what distinguishes the *Enigmas* in her oeuvre is, as Verónica Grossi (2019) has argued, its focused exploration of the epistemological dimension of poetry within a transatlantic female context.

Inspired by Sor Juana, the nuns and noblewomen of the Soberana Asamblea de la Casa del Placer deliberately contributed to shaping her monstrosity. Yet they did so with a different approach from that of their male counterparts.²⁸ The four preserved testimonies, all in manuscript form, provide a distinct entry into the *Enigmas*. They satirize the prevailing male literary culture of the time, including its formulas and technologies, particularly targeting the printing press. The women of the Casa del Placer, being admirers of Sor Juana, likely acquainted themselves with the printed volumes of her works. As mentioned already, these volumes featured an abundance of preliminary texts predominantly written by male authors. These kinds of preliminary texts were emblematic of the printed culture of the time. Consequently, the manuscript poems composed by the nuns of the Casa del Placer inherently satirize the patriarchal anxiety to “approve” of Sor Juana's literary works.

The paratexts preceding the *Enigmas*, crafted for private use, playfully mock the printed circulation model. Approvals and censures are conveyed through handwritten poems by different nuns. Even the cover, designed to mimic prints, parodically carries a handwritten “imprint,” reading: “Por su más rendida y fiel aficionada sórora Juana Inés de la Cruz, Décima Musa. Lisboa. En la oficina del más reverente Respeto, y impresor de la majestuosa veneración. A costa de un lícito entretenimiento. 1695. Con todas las facultades que puede tener un rendimiento, que no llega a tocar la necedad de licenciado” (Cruz 2019, 247–48). While the imprint information carries a significant legal status in any printed book of the period—an aspect that would rarely be questioned—the handwritten covers of the *Enigmas* mock these details by replicating their jargon and visual layout. Free from the constraints faced by printed texts under censorship, they incorporate inside jokes: There is no tangible printer, no individual physically printing the text of the *Enigmas*. Instead, there is the portrayal of a personified “Most Reverent Respect.” Furthermore, what gets printed is not a literary piece but a textual embodiment of a “majestic veneration” for Sor Juana, the preliminary handwritten texts being the tangible product of that embodiment. In essence, right from the cover of the *Enigmas*, the Portuguese nuns parody the

²⁶ Georgina Sabat-Rivers and Elías Rivers (1995, 679) attribute the *Enigmas*' editorial misfortune to the fact that Martínez's edition was published in a Spanish journal and that there were initial doubts about its authenticity.

²⁷ Kirk (2007) dedicates a chapter of her *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico* to the Casa del Placer due to its connection to Sor Juana. The most significant contribution since then is Yadira Munguía's edition of the *Enigmas*, which is the one quoted in this article. This edition expands the contextual understanding of the *Enigmas* through an extensive introduction that challenges some assumptions made by Martínez López and Alatorre.

²⁸ Scholars have sought to understand the social dynamics of the Casa del Placer. While Martínez López (1968, 55) saw it as an “academia de locutorio,” where nuns gathered around the *locutorio* of one of their convents, the involvement of various convents and the cloistered vows of some suggest that it could have been an epistolary academy. However, this is merely a presumption, as neither the existence of the Casa del Placer nor the circulation of the poems among convents has been proven (Munguía 2019, 29).

limitations imposed on them by a male-dominated knowledge production system, such as literary jargon and clichés, censorship, and the printing press.²⁹

In the preamble of the collection, the women of the Casa del Placer construct their own narrative around the figure of Sor Juana, engaging in a discourse in which the Mexican nun herself takes part. The *Enigmas* are preceded by two poems written by Sor Juana—an ode dedicated to the Casa del Placer and a sonnet addressed to the reader—along with four laudatory poems in Spanish dedicated to Sor Juana by nuns and the former vicereine of Mexico.³⁰ Sor Juana cultivated a close friendship with the vicereine, who is believed to have played a crucial role in facilitating Sor Juana’s connection with the Casa del Placer (Calvo and Colombí 2015, 94). The collection also features as paratexts two prose *censores* and three poetic approvals in verse, each signed by different nuns, all of which are written in Portuguese. With Sor Juana as their accomplice in the game, the women of the Casa del Placer also employed the theme of exceptionality in all the preliminary texts. For example, the ex-vicereine addresses Sor Juana, expressing that her book, a creation born of Sor Juana’s genius, surpasses even herself, stating, “A ti misma te excediste” (264), and deeming it a “Maravilla reservada/a tu ingenio” (Cruz 2019, 263, 265) because of its exceptional quality. Similarly, Sor Feliciano de Milão, a nun in the Convent of Odivelas, elaborates in her *censores* on Sor Juana’s enigmatic aura, characterizing the collection as a “breve e misterioso volume” (281), while Maria das Saudades, a nun in the Convent of Vialonga, declares herself an admirer of the “Décima Musa” (282). Sor Juana, like the monstrous sphinx, consistently resides at the heart of the enigma—within the *Enigmas*—serving as the focal point of the interpretive process required for the resolution of poetic riddles.

In addition to emphasizing Sor Juana’s exceptional qualities, the majority of the preliminary texts elaborate further on characterizing her as an exception by associating her nationality with the perceived exoticness of America during the period (Echenberg 2023, 43). Sor Francisca Xavier, from the Monastery of La Rosa, refers to Sor Juana as the American “treasure” (274). In her poem, Sor Mariana de Santo Antonio, from the Monastery of Santa Clara, includes Sor Juana in the “apolíneo coro” of the Muses; when describing her “hermoso rostro,” she states:

de cuyos ojos, tanto
el sol a rayos ciega,
que ignora el Occidente
amaneciendo sólo en tus estrellas,
cuyo discurso España
tanto estima, que diera
por mejorarse de Indias
toda su plata a cambio de tus letras. (Cruz 2019, 258)

With exaggerated hyperbole, Sor Mariana proposes a connection between Sor Juana’s perceived perfection in both beauty and discourse and the material wealth Spain gained through colonization (Echenberg 2023, 150). Sor Mariana not only asserts that the kingdom would willingly trade its economic wealth for Sor Juana’s literary legacy but also hints later that the *Enigmas* imply an “influjo” (261), or transference of wit, from Mexico to the Iberian Peninsula, underlining this concept of trade.

²⁹ Kirk (2016, 136–68) has shown the patriarchal dynamics at play in the dissemination of knowledge in colonial Mexico and its specific relationship to Sor Juana’s case.

³⁰ The relationship between Sor Juana and the vicereine, explicitly labeled a “particular aficionada a la autora” in the title of her poem (Cruz 2019, 263), has sparked debates among *sorjuanistas*. For a comprehensive analysis of this connection, see the study preceding the edition by Calvo and Colombí (2015). Interestingly, Calvo and Colombí characterize the relationship between the vicereine and Sor Juana as “enigmática” (11).

Simoa de Castillo, from the Monastery of Santa Ana, further underscores Sor Juana's transatlantic nature, noting that her works, like the sun, illuminate "a Españas dos" (280), referring to New Spain, or Mexico. If we take into account Sebastián de Covarrubias's (1611) definition of *enigma* as "una oscura alegoría o cuestión y pregunta engañosa y enredada" and "enigmático" as "lo que se propone con oscuridad" (353r), it prompts a reconsideration of Simoa de Castillo's allegory of Sor Juana as an illuminating Sun. Curiously, this symbol seems to be the opposite of the *Enigmas*. In contrast to Sor Juana's earlier works, where the objective might have been illumination, the *Enigmas* appear to revel in obscuring concepts rather than revealing them. In this case, true enlightenment occurs not during the initial reading but upon successfully solving the enigma. Alternatively, those who cannot decipher the enigmas may face a mortal fate, as explained by Covarrubias (1611) in his definition of *esfinge*:

ESFINGE. Lat. *sphinx*, fue un monstruo, cerca de la ciudad de Tebas, cuya cabeça, cuello, y pechos eran de donzella, el cuerpo de perro, con alas de ave, voz humana, uñas de león y cola de dragón. Esta dizen se ponía sobre un peñasco alto, cerca del camino real y pasajero, y a todos los que por allí pasaban les proponía un enigma, y no les respondiendo a él, ni declarándosele, los despedaçaba con las uñas; y el qué es cosa y cosa era este: "¿Cuál será el animal, que a la mañana anda en cuatro pies, y a medio día en dos, y a la tarde en tres?" . . . Esto todo es fábula. Alberto Magno y otros autores dizen que la esfinge es un animal de especie de monas, cabellos largos, con dos tetas grandes a los pechos, con una cola larga, que tira en la color a negra. Son disciplinables y serán como los gatos pauses que traen de Indias, aunque mayores de cuerpo. (371r)

Covarrubias portrays the sphinx as an allegorical representation of the challenging process of solving enigmas. While the mythological aspects are acknowledged as fables, he introduces a crucial clarification—sphinxes are not entirely mythical. In a tangible reality, these creatures resemble a cross between monkeys and wildcats, akin to domesticable animals imported from the Americas. This portrayal by Covarrubias bridges the legendary and the real, accentuating the complexity of enigma-solving through an animalistic analogy. Engaging in a play of expectations, Covarrubias weaves a narrative that compels readers to consider sphinxes as real monsters. Covarrubias's definition enhances the enigmatic aura surrounding the sphinx, subtly suggesting its existence and hinting at a potential origin from the Indies and places similarly perceived as exotic. By manipulating reader expectations, Covarrubias induces a sense of fear and monstrosity, expertly exploiting the mysterious allure of the sphinx.

"Timidly transferring from monster to eye": A poetics of dedication

Much like the sphinx, depictions of Sor Juana seamlessly fused elements of legend with reality. For the nuns and noblewomen who likely constituted the Casa del Placer, Sor Juana posed a tangible and monstrous challenge—twenty profoundly complex enigmas. Beyond the riddles that form the core of the collection, a veil of mystery shrouds the Casa del Placer itself. Details regarding its members and its practices remain elusive, intensifying the enigma surrounding the entire phenomenon. Some critics assume that the Casa del Placer had a fixed location and held in-person meetings (Martínez López 1968, 55), while others doubt the existence of such gatherings, suggesting that it might have been an ephemeral, epistolary, or even metaphorical academy (Munguía 2019, 29). In fact, the intrigue deepens when one considers that the most interesting texts may be the ones that are absent—the responses generated or found by the nuns and noblewomen as they unraveled the *Enigmas*. These poems, which we must distinguish from those included as

paratexts, are the missing pieces that would provide a richer understanding of the intellectual and creative exchange within the Casa del Placer.

Critics and readers alike have labeled the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* as “unanswerable” (Munguía 2019, 214; Pluecker 2015, 26). Yet this defeatist characterization does not negate the multitude of formal attempts made to unravel them.³¹ In fact, the *Enigmas* represent a peculiar form of “textual inexhaustibility,” as defined in *S/Z* by Roland Barthes (1974, 58, 132).³² The performative act of exegesis generates new texts ad infinitum, underscoring the boundless quality of Sor Juana’s riddles. Indeed, the extreme difficulty of these enigmas might have made the process of interpretation exceedingly challenging for the women of the Casa del Placer. This obstacle could be linked to a pervasive theme across all the paratexts surrounding the collection, surpassing even Sor Juana’s exceptional status: the concept of dedication, the idea of offering oneself to the writing and interpretation of poetry.

Building on the notion of the *Enigmas* as an offering, in this final section of my article, I elaborate on what I call a poetics of dedication. This poetics, which permeates Sor Juana’s oeuvre, underscores the significance of dedication in her poems. While a poetics of dedication is present throughout Sor Juana’s work, her self-awareness of this commitment becomes more pronounced over time, culminating in the *Enigmas*. Instances of this reflection can be found in Sor Juana’s renowned declaration, “No me acuerdo haber escrito por mi gusto sino es un papelillo que llaman *El Sueño*” (Cruz [1691] 1997, 845), reinforced by the statement, “El escribir nunca ha sido dictamen propio, sino fuerza ajena” (829–830), both found in her “Respuesta a Sor Filotea.” In essence, the inception of all her poems, save one, was driven by her intention to *dedicate them* to others. A poetics of dedication is also present in the very title of the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* and recurrent in Sor Juana’s prologues, laudatory poems, and prose *censuras* that precede the collection. The concept of offering oneself for sacrifice permeates the collection and manifests in various forms, such as *rendimiento* (255, 267, 277), *holocausto* (267, 278), *oblación* (251, 278), *ofrenda* (259, 261, 262, 273, 279), and *sacrificio* (255, 266, 279, 282).³³ Adding to the description of Sor Juana in the title as “su más rendida y fiel aficionada” (247), all these formulas are connected to the author’s commitment to the academy and the mirroring interpretive process that its members are required to undertake.

Playing on the enigmatic aura attributed to her, the *Enigmas* challenge two common and interrelated frameworks imposed on Sor Juana’s work: one that interprets her through a lyrical lens, defining it as a genre of “expression of interiority,” while the other portrays her biographically as a creative genius in solitude, adhering to romantic precepts. Embracing the so-called new lyric studies, as defined by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, allows us to delve into not only Sor Juana’s poetry but also the *sorjuanismo* that surrounds her.³⁴ According to this field of study, contemporary critics and poetry consumers alike are limited in experiencing the full range of poetic subgenres from the past, a phenomenon Jackson and Prins (2014) have labeled “the lyricization of poetry” (7). In the past, various poetic subgenres existed, including epistles, odes, elegies, and hymns, and lyric was just one of them. The lyricization of poetry is “the historical process by which different poetic

³¹ Namely, critics and artists who have proposed answers to the *Enigmas* include Martínez López, Alatorre, Gabriel Zaid, Georgina Sabat de Rivers, Carlos Elizondo, Jean-Michel Wissmer, Roberto Reyes, Rocío Sánchez, and Javier García González. For their respective answers, see Munguía (2019, 214–23).

³² Curiously, Barthes (1974, 209–210) employs the metaphor of enigma to describe the hermeneutic code.

³³ As Lavrin (1999, 79) points out, “During the last years of her life, [Sor Juana] seemed to have lived as the typical nun depicted in religious literature, undergoing a self-holocaust of humility and penitence.”

³⁴ The concept of the lyricization of poetry, central to new lyric studies, was initially proposed by Virginia Jackson in her book *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), further explored in a PMLA dossier titled “Theories and Methodologies: The New Lyric Studies” edited by her in January 2008, and extensively developed by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins in their edited volume *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (2014).

genres began to be collapsed into an abstract idea of lyric in the course of the nineteenth century, [the process by which] various historical verse genres gradually became ‘lyric’ as reading practices shifted over the nineteenth century and were consolidated in the twentieth century” (14). In other words, Jackson and Prins argue that contemporary critics and poetry consumers struggle to appreciate the diverse poetic spectrum from the past. The lyric has progressively engulfed other subgenres, leading to a gradual inability to distinguish between them (86–92). This teleology narrows our poetic spectrum and forces us, as contemporary readers, to interpret every poem under the concept of lyric. Consequently, we often read poems that were not originally conceived as lyric works through the characteristics of the lyric—an urgent attempt to express the self. The lyricization of poetry has “reached its culmination in twentieth-century criticism” (7). In Sor Juana’s case, the process of lyricization of her *Enigmas*—and the rest of her poetry—has been exceptionally evident and extreme.

Sor Juana’s writing has often been interpreted within *sorjuanista* criticism as a technique of personal self-justification or a strategy to authorize herself in the face of dominant patriarchal discourse. This perspective views her work as a project aimed at constructing a strong subject, one capable of confronting and challenging authorized male voices. Contrary to this, my analysis of the *Enigmas* suggests that the nun’s discursive tactic does not seek personal authorization or legitimation of her knowledge. Instead, it adopts a diametrically opposed and, in my view, more intriguing strategy: Sor Juana problematizes all authority through the questioning of the enunciator’s “I”—or the lyric voice in the case of poetic texts.

The *Enigmas* conceive the text as the construction of a shared subjectivity. Through her writing, Sor Juana emphasizes the sacrifice of her own authority, consistently highlighting that the process of interpretation by nuns and noblewomen holds greater significance. The strategy of challenging agency, therefore, has a much more subversive nature than the appropriation of dominant discourses. In this approach, Sor Juana’s reader ceases to be a passive recipient and becomes responsible for interpreting the text, emerging as its primary agent. In other words, Sor Juana shares her authority with her readers. Sor Juana’s sacrifice of her own lyric self is evident in the two poems she writes as prologues to the *Enigmas*:

A vuestros ojos se ofrece
este libro, por quedar
ilustrado a tanto sol,
digno de tanta deidad.
...
Tan feliz será leído
que ufano dilatará
los instantes de atención
a siglos de vanidad.
...
Como deidades os cree;
pero, al ver vuestra beldad,
como halla más que creer,
se excusa del ignorar. (2019, 248–53)

Sor Juana shifts the focus of the poetic voice from herself to the personified book, delegating lyric agency to her literary creation. If we consider the paratexts as a cohesive textual entity, then the dedication unfolds as a dynamic interplay within a triangular relationship: the nuns address Sor Juana, who, in turn, addresses the book, and the book communicates with the women of the Casa del Placer. This intricate triangle fosters a sense of community where the collective interpretation and coexistence of diverse perspectives take precedence over the identity of an individual poet. Sor Juana’s poetic

approach fosters a community where collective interpretation and writing thrive, highlighting the solidarity among women and transcending traditional notions of individual creativity or solitary genius.³⁵

Expanding beyond the *Enigmas*, the blurring of the poetic self in Sor Juana's works is a recurring theme in much of her poetic corpus. The majority of her poems, collected and published by the vicereine of Mexico, imply a relinquishing of agency. This aspect is crucial to understanding Sor Juana's alternative discourse—a construction of a horizontal voice that advocates for the collective production of knowledge. Both in the *Enigmas* and throughout her poetry, Sor Juana's emphasis shifts from self-glorification towards embracing collective writing, thus underscoring her commitment to a communal ethos in her literary pursuit for knowledge: a poetics of dedication.

To conclude, I explicitly illustrate how the poetics of dedication functions in the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* and how it directly connects to the discourses of exceptionality surrounding Sor Juana. In the *Enigmas*, this poetics of dedication operates in both directions and is rooted, perhaps paradoxically, in the very aura of monstrosity that envelops the nun. The women of the Casa del Placer regard Sor Juana as a female monster—a sphinx—who offers them a series of riddles, such as Enigma 19:

¿Cuál es aquella deidad
que, con medrosa quietud,
no conserva la virtud
sin favor de la maldad? (Cruz 2019, 287)

Every enigma by Sor Juana is crafted as a question with the poetic “I” completely absent. In other words, Sor Juana sacrifices her lyric “I,” transferring her agency to the women of the Casa del Placer. The poetics of dedication is, therefore, closely intertwined with the discourses of self-sacrifice that Sor Juana emphasized toward the end of her life.

When they consult the “Index” to solve Enigma 19, the women of the Casa del Placer are instructed to resolve the riddle by composing “un epigrama” (Cruz 2019, 287). At that moment, the poetics of dedication becomes bidirectional, as the Casa del Placer, collectively, must now offer poems to Sor Juana—texts that provide the solutions she, as a sphinx, a female monster, has demanded. This bidirectionality of the poetics of dedication was explicitly articulated in one of the paratextual poems of the collection, written by none other than the vicereine of Mexico, the Countess of Paredes. Addressing Sor Juana and referring to the space of the Casa del Placer, she writes:

Allí serán explicados
porque no debieses menos
al acierto de escribirlos
que a la dicha de *ofrecerlos*.
Allí verás entendidos
aquellos profundos conceptos,
que fuera impuro *holocausto*
reservarle el pensamiento. (Cruz 2019, 267; my emphasis)

In sum, the *Enigmas ofrecidos a la Casa del Placer* exemplifies a poetics of dedication that both centers and decenters Sor Juana's authorial presence. By positioning herself as a female monster—a sphinx who poses riddles to the nuns and noblewomen—the poet

³⁵ This is not the first time Sor Juana provided texts to other nuns to foster textual communities. She did so earlier with her *Ofrecimientos para el Santo Rosario de quince misterios*, a version of which was found in the prayer book of Sor Francisca de Castillo, a nun from New Granada. The text, emphasizing offering, also implies an “estratégico deseo de construir una autoridad colectiva e individual garantizada por lo que podría denominarse una ‘sororidad letrada’ o solidaridad femenina en la escritura” (Pineda Cupa 2024, 34–35).

transfers her lyrical agency to her readers, encouraging an active engagement with her text that blurs the lines between author and audience. This dynamic is most evident in the bidirectionality of the poetics of dedication, where the Casa del Placer reciprocates Sor Juana's enigmatic offerings with their own poetic responses. Notably, it is precisely this "female monster"—an identity shaped by the contemporary men who sought to define her—that Sor Juana reclaims and reshapes in her final work, turning it into a source of epistemological power. As highlighted by the paratextual poem by the Countess of Paredes, the act of writing becomes a mutual ritual of interpretation and dedication. The *Enigmas* not only invite but also necessitate a collaborative and performative process of meaning-making, demonstrating how Sor Juana's self-fashioned monstrous aura serves as a vehicle for literary exchange among women, challenging conventional notions of authorship and intellectual agency.

Final thoughts

As this article nears its conclusion, one question persists without a definitive answer: Was Sor Juana a sphinx? This inquiry is not one to be lightly pondered, for like the riddle of the sphinx itself, both success and failure in addressing it may carry grave consequences. Why? Let's revisit the myth as beautifully retold by Anna Shechtman (2024, 3–4):

The Sphinx poses a riddle, and she presents an enigma. In the myth of Oedipus, written by Sophocles and revived by Freud, the Sphinx is a hybrid figure. Part human, part lion, part bird, she's as inscrutable as her words. She guards the entrance to Thebes, a threshold that Oedipus must pass if he is to return home and fulfill his prophesized fate If Oedipus fails to solve the Sphinx's riddle, she will descend from her perch and devour him, as she has so many men before. But Oedipus solves it Oedipus prevails, and the Sphinx falls to her death. Or, in some tellings, she devours herself. The Riddle of the Sphinx, in other words, is a zero-sum game. It's a contest for which there is only one victor, one victim, and one solution, which amounts to the death of the creature who is both a woman and not properly human at all. Language is the Sphinx's doing and her undoing.

Yes, Sor Juana embraced the metaphor of the sphinx, particularly toward the end of her life, when she chose to socialize her access to knowledge at the cost of pushing the sacrifice of lyric agency, which her fame entailed, to the extreme. Does this mean that Sor Juana was a sphinx? No. Merely posing this question would be to repeat a gesture of judgment. In a final stage of life undoubtedly fraught with suffering, Sor Juana the person was overshadowed, contradicted, and ultimately pained by Sor Juana the writer, the phenomenon, the cultural icon. On her deathbed, before the God she loved, she declared herself "la más indigna e ingrata criatura" (Cruz [1695] 1997b, 874), a sentiment reiterated in her will: "He sido y soy la peor que ha habido" (1997a, 876). Sor Juana, like the sphinx, devoured herself as a form of penance. But was Sor Juana a sphinx? Perhaps it is not for us to solve that riddle.

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