

A Response to Jackie Hoermann

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In her paper “Speaking without Words: Silence and Epistolary Rhetoric of Catholic Women Educators on the Antebellum Frontier, 1828–1834,” Jackie Hoermann comprehensively explores the effectiveness of silence as a rhetorical device in the epistolary communication of nuns Spalding and Duchesne with their local press and municipal officials. Hoermann successfully discusses how the nuns’ silent rhetoric not only destabilized theological and gender politics within their respective communities, but also improved them. While scholarship on antebellum nuns’ rhetorical silence is minimal, scholarship on one of Hoermann’s crucial contextualizing figures, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, is not. Hoermann presents Sor Juana’s effective rhetoric and “silent innuendo” as potentially important to her framing of Spalding’s and Duchesne’s rhetorical success, though she never unpacks, not even briefly, Sor Juana’s purpose in her argument. To commend Sor Juana’s rhetoric in “successfully opposing Church authorities” and then not to explicate the context of her success or offer an example of it is an oversight, especially considering that Sor Juana’s rhetoric spans theological, poetical, and epistolary writing and could offer much insight into the work of Spalding and Duchesne (21).

Hoermann argues that “the crux of [her] thesis rests on the dichotomy” asserted by Cheryl Glenn that “silence is a strategic choice . . . or an enforced position”—thus nuns’ epistolary communication must operate within a stringent, consequential theological and sociopolitical framework (Hoermann 21; Glenn 13). The tumultuous antebellum environment that facilitated Spalding’s and Duchesne’s writing was similar to the patriarchal hostility Sor Juana faced from the Inquisition at the end of the seventeenth century in New Spain. Sor Juana’s epistolary rhetoric both undermined and recapitulated the sociopolitical climate within which she wrote, to the point that it effectively contributed to changing the purpose and application of religion as a political tool in New Spain (Underberg 300). Sor Juana published a critical letter in 1690 under the pseudonym Sor Filotea de la Cruz that challenged long-standing liturgical views on human agency and intelligence presented forty years earlier in a famous sermon by Portuguese Jesuit Padre Antonio Vieira (Egan 208). Choosing to publish her criticism in epistolary form and under a pseudonym was a gesture appropriate enough to avoid violent backlash from the Church, yet an action bold enough to stretch theological boundaries—a tactical self-silencing that exemplifies Hoermann’s focus on nuns’ rhetoric operating simultaneously between “strategy” and “enforcement.”

Hoermann cites Julie Bokser’s article “Sor Juana’s Rhetoric of Silence” as her contextualizing source on Sor Juana’s “silent innuendo”; however, she seems to have ignored the pressing appropriateness of Bokser’s assessment of Sor Juana’s strategic and enforced silence (21). As Bokser explains, after the publication of Sor Juana’s critical letter, the bishop responsible for publishing it releases an epistolary address in which he admires her writing talent but instructs her to select more edifying, divine subjects appropriate to her female intellectual capacity—or perhaps to cease writing altogether. Ironically, Sor Juana’s challenge to Padre Vieira’s sermon *does* focus on the “edifying” and “divine” issues her bishop had recommended she pursue. Scholars attribute the abrupt

close to Sor Juana's writing career to the bishop's pleasant condescension—and his veiled threat. While she seems to be coerced into silence, her final engagement with epistolary rhetoric proves that her silence is tactical and assertive in the face of intimidation (9). Sor Juana sends the bishop a collection of diverse religious pamphlets and letters—a collection obedient to his instruction that she write on more edifying, divine subjects but an attack against his suggestion that she stop writing altogether. Sor Juana's final letters, according to Bokser, "are fraught with the tension of power dynamics, of hyper-alertness to who is in charge . . . of how to wield, acknowledge, and subvert authority" (10). Sor Juana's rhetoric in epistolary communication shows that she is aware of what to enforce through speech and what to repress in silence in order to navigate the supercilious patriarchy of Church authorities. Sor Juana's ultimate silence is both strategic and enforced, which suggests that the "crux" of Hoermann's thesis rests not so much on a dichotomy between the two—that encourages opposition—but on a hybridity that is a correlative, dialogic performance of assertion, repression, strategy, and enforcement.

Facing similar theological and patriarchal boundaries, Spalding and Duchesne chose, as Sor Juana did more than a century earlier, to undermine such theological patriarchy not through rhetorical speech but through epistolary rhetorical silence. The nuns' silent rhetoric proved successful in strengthening liturgical and community relationships as well as in improving local infrastructure. That Hoermann examines Spalding's and Duchesne's rhetorical strategies without fully connecting their relevance to those of Sor Juana interrupts the frame Hoermann works to establish in bettering readers' familiarity with the theological and gender politics that the nuns faced. The seamless relevance of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's epistolary rhetoric as a contextualizing precursor to the work of Spalding and Duchesne is underdeveloped—the mention of her acclaimed "silent innuendo" begging full connections to be made (21). To recognize Sor Juana's position as simultaneously strategic and enforced recapitulates the very dichotomy Hoermann seeks to explore: while there is a tension between the two, it is not as opposed as Hoermann asserts, and further exploration of Sor Juana's epistolary rhetoric proves such.

Works Cited

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