

Episode 8: Oxford Spanish Literature podcast

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:01

Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:15

Hi, Alice. How are you?

Alice Brooke 00:16

I'm alright. Thank you, yes. How are you?

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:19

Yeah, I'm good, I'm good.

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Alice Brooke 00:21

My name is Dr. Alice Booke. I'm a Spanish tutor at Merton College and I specialise in the literatures of the 16th and 17th century Hispanic world. That's what sometimes is known as the Spanish Golden Age.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:38

What's the text that we'll be speaking about today and who wrote it?

Alice Brooke 00:42

So the text that we'll be looking at today is a poem. It's a sonnet. And it was written by a 17th century Mexican poet named Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Like most poems written at that time, it doesn't have a title, so we generally refer to it by its first line, which in this case, is 'Este, que ves, engaño colorido'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:06

So what's the poem about?

Alice Brooke 01:08

So on a surface level, the poem is about a painting. More specifically, it's about a portrait of the poet herself. And the premise of the poem is that someone, probably her patron, has commissioned a portrait of Sor Juana, and Sor Juana is responding to it. At first, essentially, she starts saying that it is far too flattering, that the artist has been swayed by passion instead of representing the truth. And this then leads to a deeper reflection about the nature of truth and illusion, about death and ageing, about the deceptiveness of physical beauty and of the senses, the illusory nature of art, and perhaps also something about fame. So it packs a lot of really big subjects into fourteen quite short lines.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:58

Yeah, it definitely sounds like it! So we know that the poem was written during what's called the Golden Age, in the 17th century in this case. So what was happening around that time, specifically in the Spanish Empire or in Mexico?

Alice Brooke 02:13

So this poem was probably written specifically between 1680 and 1688 when Sor Juana was in her thirties. It was written in Mexico City and would have been written in the convent where she lived as a nun, so we have a...quite a good idea of where it is located geographically, quite specifically. This was a period of relative stability and prosperity in New Spain, which is what the region that we now call Mexico was called in the 17th century. Mexico City in this period was the centre of Spanish imperial trade routes, which brought wealth and a wide diversity in...of different people into the city and into the region as a whole. So there are other things going on, there is disruption, there are riots, there are all the kinds of things that you would expect from a large cosmopolitan city in any period. But broadly, it's a period of relative stability and prosperity for the environment in which Sor Juana was living and writing.

Christy Callaway-Gale 03:20

So maybe you can tell us a bit about what sort of literature was being written at this time then and how the poem that we're going to focus on compares to that?

Alice Brooke 03:31

Yeah, so across the Spanish Empire, mostly in Spain and the Americas, as I said, the 16th and 17th centuries are a period of huge literary productivity...the Golden Age of Spanish literature, as we call them. And, because Sor Juana comes right at the end of that period, she has this huge range of sources to draw on and to imitate, and we can definitely see that influence in this particular poem. At the same time, by the time that Sor Juana is writing, almost all of those most famous literary figures from the preceding century have died. So she doesn't really have any direct contemporaries of the same stature who are writing and publishing at the same time that she is.

Christy Callaway-Gale 04:20

And so thinking a bit more generally about just being an author in the 17th century, I mean, how did authors earn a living? Because, I mean, now we think about authors earning a living from sales of books, for example, but also, it's really difficult to be a full-time author, lots of authors have other jobs. So how did it work in the 17th century for Sor Juana?

Alice Brooke 04:41

So for many authors the way that it worked, including Sor Juana, was the role of patrons, and a patron would be somebody who was probably politically quite powerful or socially quite influential, who would be able to either give you direct commissions, or secure commissions from other people. Now, for Sor Juana, her patrons played a really important role in her life and were crucial to her literary success. She's slightly different because she was a nun, so she didn't actually need to earn a living, per se, but her patrons and supporters were the people who paid the rather considerable sum that was needed to enter a convent in that period. And throughout her literary career, she enjoyed the support of some of the most powerful political figures in New Spain. And they were also an important source of political support in an era where the idea of a nun gaining a literary reputation by writing love poetry, for example, wasn't universally accepted. So they have a financial role, certainly, but there's also a political role for patrons.

Christy Callaway-Gale 05:55

So you've said that Sor Juana had all this powerful support, support of powerful people. Was that quite unique, or were there other female authors writing at a similar time that also benefited from these sorts of powerful supporters?

Alice Brooke 06:11

It was quite common for women, especially nuns who were the women most likely to be literate in this period, to write poetry and plays to entertain other sisters in their convents, or to participate in literary competitions, sometimes under male pseudonyms. But not many of these texts were published, at least not under their own names. But we are always finding more and more of these texts in libraries and archives, so it's a really exciting field to be working in. So in a sense, Sor Juana, she was unique in the level of fame that she achieved, but she certainly wasn't the only woman writing good poetry in the period.

Christy Callaway-Gale 06:49

We know that Sor Juana's intellectual ability drew quite a lot of attention, but were there any other reasons for that attention? I mean, the way that she wrote or the sorts of things she wrote about, was that controversial in any way?

Alice Brooke 07:05

So there certainly was some controversy around her works and in some of her poems and letters she talks about the resistance and the critiques that she's faced. Partly that's because she was a woman writer and there were some people within society who were opposed to the idea of a female author, particularly a nun, writing secular literature. But as we said, there are also people who really supported her in that endeavor. So I think it's important not to imagine that this was just an old-fashioned way of thinking, that everybody would have been opposed to the idea of her...of her writing. She has both support and criticism. Perhaps her most controversial work was a theological treatise that she wrote, in which she critiqued a sermon given by a renowned Portuguese Jesuit preacher named António Vieira, and in which she takes him to task for faulty theological reasoning. Now, this was quite audacious because Vieira was one of the most famous theological figures of the 17th century Spanish and Portuguese world, and that produced some direct and indirect criticism to which Sor Juana felt she had to respond. But there's also evidence that it was a work...that this treatise was a work that she continued to be very proud of, and which she chose, in fact, to headline the second volume of her collected works. So again, it's a bit ambiguous, it's sometimes difficult to know exactly how people responded to these kinds of works. And the best

thing that we can do is to put together the bits of evidence that...that we've got, so there were cert-... there's certainly evidence of some criticism, of some negative reaction...but we also continue to see that support and positive reaction as well.

Christy Callaway-Gale 09:12

So, Alice, do you want to read the poem, since it's quite short, before we get into some of the detail on the text itself?

Alice Brooke 09:21

Yeah, so it reads: 'Este, que ves, engaño colorido, / que del arte ostentando los primores, / con falsos silogismos de colores/ es cauteloso engaño del sentido; // este en quien la lisonja ha pretendido /excusar de los años los horrores / y, venciendo del tiempo los rigores, / triunfar de la vejez y del olvido, // es un vano artificio del cuidado, es una flor al viento delicada, / es un resguardo inútil para el hado: // es una necia diligencia errada, / es un afán caduco y, bien mirado, / es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada.'

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:13

And so this poem is about a visual piece of art, as you mentioned, it's about a portrait of the poet Sor Juana. Can you tell us a bit about the genre of portrait poetry?

Alice Brooke 10:27

So in this period, there's a really close connection between poetry and the visual arts. Like a painting, a poem can either give us an epic birds-eye view of something, or it can hone in on minute details and draw our eyes and our attention towards those. Also, many poems evoke such striking visual images that it's kind of as if we are looking at a painting with our eyes drawn towards its various elements. And across Sor Juana's poetry, we find several poems that are connected to the art of portraiture. In some of them, they might paint, so to speak, a picture of a particular person using words, or in other cases, they somehow engage with an actual or imagined visual portrait. I think in this instance, the really interesting point to note is that Sor Juana is actually engaging with a portrait of herself. So in that sense, she's both the author of the poem, and its subject.

Christy Callaway-Gale 11:33

So the poem starts with the line 'Este que ves', so it seems like the poem is addressed to someone in particular, and presumably someone the author knows quite well as it's the informal 'tú' conjugation of the verb 'ver' that's used here. So do we know who this person might be? And can you tell us anything about the relationship between these two people?

Alice Brooke 11:57

So we can't be absolutely certain because the poem doesn't tell us, but in all likelihood, this poem is addressed to a woman named María Luisa Manrique del Lara y Gonzaga, who was the Countess of Paredes and was Sor Juana's most significant patroness. She was vicereine of New Spain from 1680 to 1686. And throughout her time in Mexico City, she formed a very close friendship with Sor Juana, often visiting her in the convent and exchanging poetry and gifts. When she returned to Spain in 1688, she took Sor Juana's papers with her and had them published to great acclaim in Madrid. An important part of their relationship was this exchange of gifts, including poems like this one, but also things like embroidered shoes, and delicacies and chocolate. So we can imagine

perhaps that what has happened here is that a portrait has been commissioned of Sor Juana and has been sent to her for her to see. And that Sor Juana is sending this poem to the vicereine in return, perhaps accompanying the portrait being sent back.

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:10

And so what sorts of themes then does Sor Juana touch on in the poem?

Alice Brooke 13:15

So the most prominent theme here is the distinction between reality and illusion, or in the language of the Spanish golden age of 'ser' and 'parecer', 'to be' and 'to seem' or 'to appear'. And that's expressed both through the exploration of the illusory nature of portraiture and the illusory nature of youthful beauty. This is a theme that is explored throughout Sor Juana's work. Both in her poetry and in her prose, she's fascinated by the way that sensory perception can be deceptive, but also about how attentive and critical minds can correct these illusions to form a more accurate view of the world.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 13:58

A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking Alice to pick out an extract from the poem so we can analyse it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Alice Brooke 14:11

So, the extract that I've chosen reads: 'es una necia diligencia errada, / es un afán caduco y, bien mirado, / es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada.' And a rough translation of it would be: 'it is a foolish mistaken effort, a worn-out fancy and, when looked at rightly, it is a corpse, it is dust, it is a shadow, it is nothing'. So this extract is the final tercet of the poem. So it's three lines long, it comes right at the very end of the poem. And the breaks between the lines come after 'errada', 'mirado' and then 'nada'. So each line effectively starts with the 'es'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 15:02

So I think the...the first thing that really jumps out at me about this tercet, about these three lines, is the repetition of 'es', from the verb 'ser', and that repetition definitely becomes more incessant as we move to the last line of...of these three lines. And so you have 'es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada'. I mean, what purpose does that repetition serve?

Alice Brooke 15:26

So I think to understand the role of that repetition, we need to go back to that first quatrain and that opposition between 'ver' and 'ser', between what a thing (in this case the portrait) looks like and what it truly is. In this case, the first two quatrains describe the painting's deceptive appearance, the way it uses tricks of color to give the impression of a lively, youthful image of its subject. The tercets then turn this on its head, revealing the portrait

for what it truly is: a sham, a useless defense against the inevitability of ageing, a misguided desire to preserve youth. And in that context, that increasingly rapid repetition of the verb 'ser', reminds the reader that despite its enticing appearance, this is the true nature of portraiture, and indeed, the true fate of its subject.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:19

And then the second thing I think that really stands out to me amongst these three lines that you've chosen, are the words 'bien mirado' and they really catch my eye because there's a comma just before 'bien mirado', and then there's a comma just afterwards. So in that sense, the commas sort of visually frame these two words. What's the significance of that exactly, do you think?

Alice Brooke 16:41

Yeah, so I think these two words are quite intriguing and they're quite key to understanding how Sor Juana perhaps differs from some of her predecessors. So, throughout the 17th century, many writers explore this tension between 'ser' and 'parecer', between the way things appear and the way things really are, and that can often lead to a sense of pessimism, a kind of complete distrust of the senses, a kind of despair at the way that we perceive the world is always going to be erroneous. Sor Juana differs from that, in that, although she recognises that the senses can be deceived, she also demonstrates a kind of optimism that, as long as we remain aware of the potential fallibilities of the senses and approach the information that they give us with a critical mindset, we can overcome that deception and learn to, quote, 'see things correctly'. And I think that that's expressed really nicely here, it's not that we need to reject the senses completely, it's just that we need to learn to 'bien mirar', to look at the things in the right way.

Christy Callaway-Gale 17:42

What about rhyme? I mean, how does rhyme affect our reading of this tercet? And of course, rhyme being aural rather than visual, how does rhyme sort of complement or jar against the emphasis on the...on the visual aspects here?

Alice Brooke 17:56

So, one of the things that Sor Juana often does with rhyme, is that she often uses the rhyme scheme to almost allow the reader to guess what a final word or phrase is going to be, thus making them actively involved in the poem. So if we take this sonnet and these lines, we know that the last word is going to need to rhyme with 'errada'. And if we follow the rhythm of the last line, we know that it has to have eleven syllables. And so, by the time we get to the fourth 'es', an attentive reader who knew their rules of Spanish poetry would have known that there are only two syllables left in the space of that line. And what's about the only word in the Spanish language that fits? It's 'nada'. And so I think that process kind of echoes what we said about 'bien mirar'. 'Bien mirar' involves being attentive to detail using one's critical faculties, spotting patterns, working out how things fit together. And that's what the rhyme structure of these last lines encourages us to do, to be involved as readers and to keep thinking.

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:07

So let's speak a bit about the adjectives in these three lines because the first line has an adjective...it has two adjectives, I think, the adjectives 'necia' and 'errada', and then the second line has the adjective 'caduco'. But then with the final line, we don't have any adjectives at all, we just have this list of, of nouns: 'cadáver', 'polvo', 'sombra', 'nada', and it feels very sparse. What can we make of that and what is Sor Juana trying to do here?

Alice Brooke 19:36

So I think again, to understand that sparsity, we can go back to the beginning of the poem. The first quatrain is extremely colourful, we have 'colorido', 'colores', words like 'ostentando', suggesting the visual richness of the portrait. Here, we've almost in a sense gone to black and white, there's a complete absence of colour and that, I think, is emphasised by the lack of adjectives. And in a sense that gives this question of 'ser' and 'parecer' an existential dimension. It's not just that painting can fool you into thinking that it is lifelike, it's that painting can give the false impression of eternal youth, when in fact, its subject, like all of us, will age and die, encapsulated particularly in those words, 'cadáver' and 'polvo'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:26

And do we know of any particular authors or texts that might have influenced Sor Juana's writing at all here?

Alice Brooke 20:33

So the two authors who are most often cited as influences on her writing are Luis de Góngora, who was a Spanish poet who lived and wrote in the 16th and early 17th centuries, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, who was a 17th century Spanish playwright. So the final line of the poem is a reworking of the final line of Góngora's sonnet 'Mientras por competir con tu cabello', which reads 'en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada'. Now, there were many reworkings of this line in the period, it was a very famous line. But perhaps the most well-known reworking of it is Sor Juana's. But I think we...if we pay attention, we can see that she's changed one key thing, she's changed the noun slightly, but more significantly, she's changed the preposition 'en', which indicates some kind of transformation or change, to the verb 'ser', indicating a continuous state. And that reflects a difference in emphasis between the two poems. So Góngora's poem follows the tradition of *carpe diem*, or in English, 'seize the day', and it emphasises how youthful beauty will turn to nothing. And although that emphasis is present in Sor Juana's poem, she's much more interested in the idea that things that we take for truth are from the start deceptive illusions.

Christy Callaway-Gale 22:06

And so taking a step back now and...and thinking about the fact that these three lines are the last lines of the poem, and the fact that this poem is potentially addressed to Sor Juana's patron, or one of her patrons, the Countess of Paredes, what impression can we say...or do we think that Sor Juana is trying to leave the Countess with here with these final lines of the poem?

Alice Brooke 22:31

So I think these final lines do three key things. First, they tap into these philosophical ideas that were really popular at the time: reminding of the deceptiveness of the senses, but also the inevitability of death through those words, 'cadáver', 'polvo'. Now, that might seem to us like an odd message to send someone who's just commissioned a portrait of you, but in this period, it was considered healthy to be periodically reminded of the inevitability of one's own death. Think second, throughout the poem, there's a very strong sense of self-deprecation. At the end of the day, the subject of the portrait is Sor Juana herself. So it's herself, she's saying, has been made to look too young, too beautiful; it's herself that she's reminding her reader is going to die to become nothing. And in a sense, that's also a way of flattering the vicereine. It's a bit like if a friend painted a picture of you, and you respond by saying, 'Oh, no, no, no, no, that's far too beautiful, I don't look like that'. We're all aware that in fact what you're doing there is kind of flattering your friend, and I think something similar is going on here. But finally, with this final tercet, I think we also need to think about how we shouldn't necessarily take that self-

deprecation entirely at face value. If we think further about the message of the poem, we can see how its appearance, its 'parecer', perhaps, is dominated by this sense of self-deprecation: the claim that the portrait is deceptive, it's too flattering, it makes her look too youthful, too beautiful; and also, in the emphasis that a portrait can't prevent the inevitability of ageing and death. But if we step back, we can also see that the poem itself, while not a testament to Sor Juana's physical beauty, does attest to her remarkable poetic skill, which I think she herself emphasises through her reworking of Góngora. So in that sense, it's perhaps not quite so self-deprecating as it first appears. And when we think about that, we can consider that although she was right that portraiture or poetry cannot be a remedy against physical death, her words have still ensured that we're still reading and talking about her over three hundred years after this poem was written.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 24:56

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[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:09

You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

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Christy Callaway-Gale 25:17

This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me, Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

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