

Female Protagonists as Authors in Gonzalo de Berceo's *Vida de Santa Oria*

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In her 1976 edition of the work, Isabel Uría Maqua contrasts Gonzalo de Berceo's final completed poem with his other two saints' tales. Most conspicuously, *Vida de San Millán* and *Vida de Santo Domingo de Silos* have a tripartite structure, whereas his story about Saint Oria, an eleventh century anchoress of San Millán, remains seamless. She also mentions the "vida muy activa" of the male saints versus Oria's passivity (121) and, most prominently, the disproportionate percentage of Oria's poem devoted to dreams rather than biography. After rechristening it *Poema de Santa Oria*, she advocates that these differences invalidate the poem as a thirteenth century Hispanic *vita* due to its affinity to "literatura mística-visionaria" of the ilk of Teresa de Ávila (122), as Menéndez y Pelayo broached (177) and Frida Weber developed later (130). Uría Maqua renews this position nearly thirty years later in her monograph *Mujeres visionarias de la edad media: Oria y Amuña en Berceo* wherein she asserts, "algunos estudiosos siguen utilizando el nombre tradicional, *Vida de Santa Oria*" despite the aforementioned evidence against doing so (10). Including the latest scholarly edition by Lappin in 2000, "algunos estudiosos" apparently refers to more than double the number of scholars who prefer the traditional title over her alternative, a penchant that persists even after reissuing the argument in 2004, suggesting that many remain unconvinced by her proposition.

The traditional title of *Vida de Santa Oria* (henceforth *VSO*) preserves the testimonial aspects of a narrative that grants life to its female protagonists in a text and tradition that otherwise obliterate them. Despite Uría Maqua's contention that "dejando a un lado las diecisiete estrofas de la introducción, en el resto del poema apenas se dice nada de las vidas de Oria y de Amuña" (10), these visions disclose abundant biographical information. Along with discovering the reality of her life, we can use the figure of Oria "to analyze what her representation tells us about the possibilities and limits for women's behavior" during the thirteenth century in Iberia (Corteguera 9). This posterior work of Gonzalo de Berceo displays numerous testimonial qualities which bespeak verisimilitude, revealing not only Oria as a historic individual, but other nameless and silent women like her.

Some scholars such as Joseph Chorprenning, Kate Greenspan, and Kristine Ibsen have even taken the reversal that mystical-visionary writing such as that by Teresa de Ávila or Margery Kempe are (auto)hagiographical such that *VSO* makes as much sense as a witness of a medieval Christian woman's suffering as it does for research into eleventh or thirteenth century Iberian mysticism. Kate Greenspan argues that "we must look to hagiography rather than autobiography as the genre to which medieval women's spiritual autobiography is most closely related" (157). During the Middle Ages, few distinguished between hagiography and autobiography, were anyone to conceive of autobiography at all. Insofar as "Christ's behavior in the Gospels was the single authenticating norm for all action" in hagiography (Heffernan 5), audiences took little notice of authorial perspective as long as they could justify believing the narrative. Work about women often began as an autobiographical confession to a clergyman, who then could import the account into the third person, depending on his creative means and purposes. According to Greenspan, "seldom did [medieval women autobiographers] write about themselves in the first person" anyway (159). In Gonzalo de Berceo's case, this meant removing Oria as a central agent of the narrative in order to privilege a male narratological prerogative, which in her case may have been a choice that

allowed the tale to withstand the scrutiny of *VSO*'s male stewards, preserving it for research today. This article by no means strives to understate the fictionalization that takes place in *VSO* and related works, but recovering the factual components of the work rescues Oria's voice so that, as Greenspan admits, "some historical fact emerges" (159).

Along with supporting the story's female protagonists' historicity, viewing *VSO* as an autohagiography makes it possible to consider the women as collaborators in men's tales about them. Comparatively, in Latin American *testimonio*, both erudite writer who makes a testifier's experience known to the rest of the world elite as well as the testifier who collaborates with him or her often take credit for the work, as in Elizabeth Burgos Dubray and Rigoberta Menchú.¹ In her preface to the work, Burgos Debray even calls Rigoberta's story "exemplary" (xi), conjuring the exemplarity of saints' lives in the Middle Ages. When David Stoll examined *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, he debunked Menchú as an author much more than Burgos Dubray, not as a protagonist in Burgos Dubray's story, whom he hardly even mentions, oftentimes relegating her identity to nothing more than the "French anthropologist who edited her testimony" (ix). According to *testimonio* theorist John Beverley, "The issue of authorship in *testimonio* is often a point of conflict between the parties involved in its production" (*Testimonio: On* 106); ultimately, collaborators must compromise and share the speakers' story to avoid legal issues. These details illustrate the weakness of crediting Gonzalo de Berceo, or the women's confessor Munno, for *VSO*. Doing so marginalizes the women in the poem, giving power back to the male thirteenth-century erudite because the women spoke their stories instead of writing them down.

Since *VSO* fits Greenspan's concept of autohagiography even though Gonzalo tells it in the third person, this article considers what John Beverley characterizes as "affinity between testimony and autobiography," but which "involves an erasure of the function and thus also of the textual presence of the 'author' that is so powerfully present in all major forms of Western literary and academic writing" ("*Testimonio*, Subalternity" 573). In this portrayal, Beverley does not so much deny authority to the subaltern testifier as he defines "author" as weightier than that actually evoked by the testifier due to his or her metonymy with the group represented. However, there is merit to calling testifiers authors, even if it applies to a collective, because doing so allows them to appropriate the power Beverley describes, making them audible in a way that diverting their authority does not. Beverley's definition of author appears to fix testifiers into the margin as if they cannot transcend their silence, remaining unredeemable objects of someone else's story. It is this very authority that Stoll ironically imbues on Menchú when he treats her testimony as worthy of scrutiny at the same time that he attempts to rob her of it, so much so, that he may have cut her off from the collective she once represented as a testifier. This article thus subjects Oria to the same sort of critical scrutiny, but in order to ratify her rather than debunk her.

Recognizing Oria and Amunna's roles in the poem may make them some of the first female Iberian authors of which we have record and open the door to recognizing others. Corteguera and Vicente use a similar philosophy for understanding women during another period of Spain:

Rather than presuppose that the intervention of men in the process of creating those texts inevitably reduced women's authority, [it is] possible to consider texts that women dictated to men, those where men interpreted women's words and deeds, or even anonymous texts in which women appear as secondary characters. (2-3)

¹ Other prominent examples include *Biografía de un cimarrón* and *Si me permiten hablar*.

While men's agendas loom over any work by or about women in the Middle Ages, such work nevertheless constitutes the best evidence at hand to recover them. As Corteguera and Vicente continue, "Women depended on male authorities to achieve their desired ends. Such compromising generally did little to change men's attitudes about women in general; yet to individual women it might have meant the difference between recognition or oblivion" (11). Hearing marginalized groups from the Middle Ages requires a more inclusive tolerance for data at hand. Corteguera and Vicente use Teresa de Ávila as an example of collaboration between women and men, but Teresa has as many male collaborators as Oria if not more in the final publication of her "autobiography."

If scholars consider Teresa de Ávila or Rigoberta Menchú authors, their many similarities with Oria raise the latter to a similar level of authority. Alexander Nehamas clarifies this by dichotomizing the figures of writer and author: the "writer is a historical person, firmly situated within a specific context, the efficient cause of a text's production" (272) while the author is "manifested or exemplified in a text and not depicted or described in it" (273). He continues, "Texts can be taken away from writers and still leave them who they are. Authors, by contrast, own their texts as one owns one's own actions" (288). Examining the poem to cull reliable information about the life of Oria and her cohort, discloses that Nehamas' definition of author suits them in that *VSO*'s differences from Gonzalo's other works help to "exemplify" not Gonzalo, but the anchoritic women he and Munno contained as writers.

Lappin observes a double entendre at the onset of the poem in which even Gonzalo calls his source text a "vida", one that you "leyerdes" (6d), a hagiography, the type of biography recognized then as having a historical basis, not merely a treatise on mystical visions. His goal to transform that *vita* into romance—"de esta sancta virgin romançar su dictado" (2b)—mirrors his approach to *Vida de Santo Domingo de Silos* in which he states, "quiero fer una prosa en román paladino / en qual suele el pueblo fablar con so vecino / ca non so tan letrado por fer otro latino" (2a-c). In both his other hagiographies, Gonzalo refers his text to a Latin source to which scholars still have access, increasing the probability that he did the same with *VSO*. Evidently, at least in Gonzalo's mind, this was a true story in the medieval epistemological sense; as he says about the manuscript from which he translates: "Él qui lo escrivió non dirié falsadat" (204a). While he poeticized the version and made logical adjustments for his audience as with the other two hagiographies, Gonzalo's habits tend to strive for "truth" to the source text with which he works rather than toward pure invention. This conforms to Jerome's definition of translation widespread during the Middle Ages of translating "not word for word, but sense for sense" (23). This would also explain why both Oria and her mother had active shrines during Gonzalo's life.

Having established that Gonzalo strove with fidelity to translate events which he considered true, it now stands to prove the trustworthiness of those he depended on. Since we do not have the Latin version, the only way to substantiate Munno's text is by mining *VSO* for evidence that Oria was probably real rather than an invention of Munno or any other interlocutor involved in the process of redaction. One of the strongest evidences of the poem's historicity lies in its style, whose divergence and orality point toward the contribution of women or other illiterates in its production. Corteguera and Vicente recommend that to overcome the difficulty of using records to distinguish between male and female voice, one can pay "close attention to deviation in the style established for a document's genre" (8). *VSO* differs stylistically from many hagiographies of its time so much so that Frida Weber calls the poem "menos organizada intelectualmente" (114), discounting that such difference could derive from Gonzalo's maturing skill as a writer. However, its stylistic difference also derives from Oria's original oral expression to her confessors, which in turn confounded traditional narrative patterns.

Julian Weiss has already gone into Oria's performative voice in depth. At the end of the poem, he notices that Oria defies the written word, transforming even death itself into a performative expression that wrestles against other prevailing forms: "When Oria dies, and her voice recovers the prelapsarian unity of body and spirit, there is a moment of dramatic anxiety: the poem dwells on the desire of Oria's mother and confessor to recollect the saint, and to preserve women's oral experience in the physicality of the clerical written word" (71). Weiss reveals Oria's desire to subject the corrupting influence of language in order to obtain a heavenly voice as "Oria's body is an enclosed space whose boundaries are protected from the intrusive and corrupting influence of worldly language" (75). Oria and Gonzalo's concerns about transcending the fallen nature of language mirrors Beverley's concerns about postmodern literature: the question of "whether literature can or should continue to be the privileged signifier of the desire for" (xiv), in this case, a better, holier life. Therefore, while Weiss says she struggles against worldly language, this must mean that she resists not only profane conversation but also textuality because the language of her expression confounds text and makes her inaudible unless we listen to the text as an echo that distorts her original performance. Gonzalo's tale acts as a *testimonio* which, in George Yúdice's words, "[emphasizes] popular, oral discourse" rather than the writing that transmits it (17). During a period in which the tape recorder did not exist, Munno and then Gonzalo execute the act of interlocutors in John Beverley's sense and definition of *testimonio* on behalf of "someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer" ("*Testimonio*, Subalternity" 571), in this case a peasant turned anchoress. "The production of a *testimonio* generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, ethnographer, or literary author" (571). The many performative qualities of Gonzalo's protagonist suggestive of illiteracy reticent toward textual expression constitute a significant deviation from standard hagiographic narrative patterns which often feature longstanding popular traditions or complex exegetical themes.

While Gonzalo relates Oria's life as a narrative in typical fashion for an erudite of his time and place, we find that Oria does not attempt to express herself in the same linear discursive style. Matthew Desing illustrates this by noting that by focusing her story around her visions, rather than on the lineal narrative of her life, "Oria valorizes process over destination; she values the journey in and of itself" even though Gonzalo has striven to arrange it otherwise (118). This corroborates the work of Caroline Bynum Walker in *Fragmentation and Redemption*: Oria, like other medieval women, speaks her story with "neither reversal nor elevation but continuity" (50). Even when the men emphasize elevation and reversal in their redactions, Oria bends the narrative, allowing for feminine seepage. If we listen to her instead of the men, she would not tell us her life from the beginning and end with her death. The first dream begins with what will happen after her life, the second with her death, and the final has no temporal referent, possibly even synthesizing past, present, and future elements. She speaks darkly to those who will hear her story, almost in defiance to the rules that govern storytelling. This seeming defiance toward hagiographic convention may be one reason that Uría Maqua resists calling it so. However, if we consider the story a "life," then it is not necessary to call it a "poem" in order to move through its complex generic layers and arrive at the testifier underneath.

Uría Maqua's contestations that *VSO*'s dreams subvert the hagiographical apparatus contain some of the strongest evidence that the poem conceals a marginalized voice rather than fabricates. *VSO* describes five dreams in total, three of Oria and two of her mother Amunna. The poem dwells most on the first in which three holy women that Oria admires appear to her and guide her into heaven to view her reward if she continues faithful until the end. Uría Maqua notes

that only 5.8% of the poem does not somehow relate to the exposition of a dream (122). However, recent scholars have made so much use of these dreams to piece together Oria's life that we may conclude that they are essential in reconstructing the historical life of these women, thus allowing the "life story" side of the tale to take on a more dominant role *through* the telling of the dreams.

One of the central evidences of the dreams' verisimilitude is the power and voice they endow both women. Mark Aquilano applies theological and psychological dream theory to *VSO*, concluding that "a scientifically informed exploration of the first vision as if it were a true, psycho-spiritual event taking place in a human body and brain suggests a surprising degree of verisimilitude in the poem's account of Oria's remarkable dream" (134). Gonzalo admits that his own male literary approach to Oria's visions does not capture their essence: "non las podrién contar palabras nin sermones" (24d). Due to being separated from her by time, gender, and social position, Gonzalo does not really hear the meaning of Oria's dreams, but intuiting their importance, he writes them down, making it possible for scholars such as Aquilano to do so. It thus becomes necessary to distinguish between Gonzalo's agenda as a cleric and Oria's echo in them. Aquilano argues that "by both rooting her more fully within her earthly identity as part of a community that had partially constrained her and by granting her a taste of complete spiritual freedom, the dream offers a form of consolation for a life situation deeply bereft of external power and authority" (135). The dream demonstrates the trust that she had in the institution of the male-dominated church to create a space for this kind of agency.

Another component of the dreams that supports that Gonzalo didn't fabricate it is that all the literary allusions attributable to Oria's side of the story stem from works redacted from or before her lifetime as opposed to works that only Gonzalo could have known. These works also appeal more to a female readership than to a male one, weakening the likelihood of Munno's authorship. In Oria's first dream

vido tres sanctas virgins de grant auctoridat,
todas tres fueron mártires en poquiella edat:
Agatha en Catanna, essa rica civdat,
Olalia en Melériða, ninna de grant beltat.
Cecila fue tercera, una mártir preçiosa. (27a-28a)

When the virgins appear to her they complement the way that she delights "en las nuestras passiones" (34a). The text even says that that very night she went to sleep after having heard "las matinas" of Eugenia, another virgin martyr (28a). Oria had access to works about all of these saints in one form or another by the end of the eleventh century in San Millán as Lappin demonstrates: "The message contained in the visions can be related to a woman's own reading and theological understanding, a message whose invention by a male cleric would have been unlikely, if not impossible" ("Introduction" 31). Oria would have felt an affinity to the stories of each of these women as both Lappin in his Introduction, Matthew Bailey, and Emily Francomano have demonstrated.

Gonzalo's description of Oria's use of literature is also true to the customs of her time. Bailey explains, "Oria, a devoted reader of their passions, has followed their example on earth and will receive their reward in heaven. The readings have served as a model for Oria's life of virgin sacrifice, and she seems to have turned their lives into hers" (28). She creates herself after the image of the virgin martyrs that she studies, suggesting that marginalized groups like anchoresses either did or were expected to use such literature to find solace—or grief as the case may be. Bailey

also observes how Oria's dictating her story to Amunna and then to Munno approximated eleventh century writing practices (26). Additionally, Robin Bower demonstrates how Oria's meticulous study of virgin martyrs results in "a miraculous narrative opening that [. . . becomes] transcendent *vitae*, otherworldly biographies that unfold for the further delectation of the reader Oria" (185). She explains how individuals throughout the Middle Ages participated in the absorption of the stories of saints in order to inscribe them into their own bodies, as does Oria. Gonzalo himself strives to emulate this possibility for us by reviving Oria through his redaction. Thus, *VSO* is not just a nexus of intertextual allusions that Gonzalo uses to showcase his literary prowess but rather demonstrate the likelihood of Oria's real life.

Amunna's dreams corroborate the aforementioned verisimilitude of Oria's dreams. During the final scene of the poem in which the deceased Oria appears to her mother, when Amunna inquires after her daughter's ultimate fate, Oria requests communion rather than answers the question. Lappin offers that "the rather shaky hold a peasant woman, in all probability illiterate, might have had over Christian doctrine" ("Notes" 213) led Amunna to have the disjuncture of a deceased person making such an unnecessary request. However, upon suspending disbelief in the dream's veracity and considering Aquilano's approaches, Oria behaves as Amunna observed her daughter behave in life, with tireless devotion and reverence for the body of Christ. This lends force to Lappin's further insistence that "devotion to the Eucharist was very much a feature of the Mozarabic church" (214). Therefore, the dream serves both as a psychological projection of Amunna's perceptions of Oria as well as eases her grief for her death.

Turning from the evidence that *VSO* exemplify Oria and her mother rather than contain them, it is possible to see how her performative choices and the verisimilitude of her dreams make Oria's voice audible. Gonzalo calls Oria an "emparedada [que], yazié entre paredes. / Avié vida lazada" (6b-c). This inaugurates the description of many painful experiences of a life suggestive of marginalization, as already noted above. Nevertheless, how marginalized is Oria since she chooses such a lifestyle? An analysis of her agency and expression problematizes notions of subalternity and marginalization by relativizing and gradating the concept:

Desqué mudó los dientes, luego a pocos annos,
págavase muy poco de los seglares pannos.
Vistió otros vestidos de los monges calannos:
podrién pocos dineros valer los sus peannos.
Desamparó el mundo Oria, toca negra da;
en un rencón angosto entró emparedada.
Suffrié grant astinencia, vivié vida lazada.
por ond' ganó en cabo de dios rica soldada. (20-21)

Oria takes on monk's garb, forsakes peasant and family life, and inflicts suffering upon herself, all in acts of explicit expression. Even though her parents "Rogavan a Dios siempre de firme coraçón / que lis quisesse dar alguna criazón / que para su servicio fues', que para ál non" (14a-c), they never fulfill this promise since the child does so independent of their direction. The word "lazedada" connotes a life of mental and emotional penitence and discipline: "Martiriaba las carnes dándolis grant lazerio, / cumplié días e noches todo su ministerio, / ieiunios e vigiliás e rezar el salterio" (112a-c). She seeks such self-affliction as a means of emancipation from a life that she views as of little worth, an extreme asceticism Bynum argues constitutes "a rejection of family. [. . .] Many medieval girls seem to have expressed such rejection, both of their own families and of the state

of marriage, through fasting and food distribution” (223 *Holy Feast*). Thus, her Christian acts serve as modes of expression. Rather than marrying or working the land she chooses avoidance of both. Her alternative to the enclosed life means manual labor, risk of sickness and war, marriage with very little options after which the cycle will continue to another generation. Through religious life, she at the very least finds solace in breaking free from the monotony of mortality into a better afterlife.

Though at one level, Gonzalo colonizes her and appropriates her deliberate use of agency, de Certeau demonstrates that she nevertheless navigates through “microscopic, multiform, and innumerable connections between *manipulating* and *enjoying*” that allow her to move independently through an imposed system (xxiv his emphasis). Marginalization requires perspective; even though the dominant group does not care to hear such a voice, to another of the same social group, a comrade has choice and expression. It should therefore not surprise that many of Oria’s actions appear conformist while at the same time expressive. As Oria dies, her last expression is not verbal but performative,

Alçó ambas las manos iuntólas en igual,
como qui riende gracias al buen rey spiritual;
çerró oios e boca la reclusa leal,
rendió a dios la alma, nunca más sintió mal. (177)

While not words, this performance signifies and allows Oria voice even as her male writer binds them in text. The thesis of Caroline Bynum Walker’s *Fragmentation and Redemption* illustrates how women found creative means through masculine systems. To deny that Oria has agency even though all these acts are choices means refusing to hear her in a way that “really matters,” as Beverley has said (576), instead appropriating her figure for other intellectual ends. While she acts well within the range of male expectations for her behavior, she still finds ways to assert her own opinion.

Likewise, anchoresses have limited contact with others, including close family, especially so for Oria because she entered the monastery at such a young age. At one moment when her mother approaches her, Oria rebuffs her: “¡qué-m affincades tanto!” (173a), insinuating a less than perfect relationship between the two. As her mother tries to break the isolation that her daughter suffers, Oria resists in silence and weakness. Oria afflicts herself so much that she ultimately transcends her earthly relationship with her mother, who then “becomes her biological daughter’s spiritual child and the recipient of the virgin’s divine instruction” (Francomano 162). Her seemingly self-defeating choices function as strategies for emancipating herself from any other earthly authority, whether familial or clerical.

Along with depictions of performance in the poem, Oria and Amunna’s dreams reveal insight into their real lived experiences and desires. Oria begins her oneiric journey by floating up with a dove into an edenic field with three virgins where

Vidieron un buen árbol, cimas bien compassadas,
que de diversas flores estaban bien pobladas.
Verde era el ramo, de foias bien cargado
fazié sombra sobrosa e logar muy temprado
Tenié redor el tronco maravilloso prado:
más valié esso sólo que un rico regnado.
Estas quatro donzellas, ligeras más que biento,

obieron con est' árbol plazer e pagamiento.
 Subieron en el todas, todas de buen talento,
 abién en el folgura en él grant complimiento. (43c-45d)

While Lappin, Farcasiu and others examine the theological symbols of this moment, the scene also has quotidian significance to a mountain girl like Oria. Instead of approaching the tree or the meadow around it to labor for food, the tree and its field offers her rest without any constraint of time. Therefore, this scene unravels a silenced life that Oria abandoned before entering her cell as well as many others who lived off the land during that period, especially those hearing the poem or who helped transmit the tradition to Gonzalo. Connie Scarborough observes this in other works by Gonzalo de Berceo as she strives to take ecocriticism to medieval Castille: “they were not merely using nature as a backdrop; they were reproducing and reflecting nature through literary lenses” (6). All of the pleasures that the dream presents also speak for the pain and agony of a present life for which the dream promises contrasting joy and hope.

From the meadow, the group of women ascends into heaven with the intercession of three “sanctos barones” (48a). There, Oria begins to see processions of righteous individuals and groups that dwell there having lived faithfully on earth, many of which result as real figures whom Oria knew personally in life or knew of. Don Gómez de Massiella, don Xemenó and Galindo each originate from the vicinity of Oria’s hometown of Villa Velayo, constructing thereby a real life connected with people whom she admired. By placing them in heaven, we receive clues about her values, though with considerable difficulty since no further documentation survives about them. By and large, Oria appreciates Christian virtue in the traditional, probably Mozarab, sense. She does not rebel against the *status quo* per se: both women stand as “exemplary representatives of the Mozarabic tradition” prominent of their region (Lappin “Introduction” 44), but with the subversive slant that they resist the Roman one. Their adherence to cultural norms also strengthens the veracity of the narrative in that it presents values that Oria most likely would have held. Of course, as it turns out, women also use the *status quo* to further ends they may not have otherwise, given the opportunities available.

For example, along with expression, the dreams give Oria power and voice through their dialectic structure: “con esta visión fue mucho enbargada, / però del Sancto Spíritu fue luego conortada: / demandólis quí eran e fue bien aforçada” (31b-d). At the onset of the dream, faced with three figures of “auctoritat” (27a), rather than tighten her lips as trained in her childhood, Oria breaks her silence and not only finds expression, but even reward for doing so as three of her virgin heroes, far from censuring her, encourage her speech and call her a “compannera” and “hermana” (32d, 33a), signifying an association she has not enjoyed in the narrative up to this point. As more and more heavenly beings address her and allow her to speak, she becomes “más osada” (69b) and willing to speak what before she felt “mucho enbergonzada” to say (69a). As Aquilano has observed, examining all of these features “through the lens of contemporary neurocognitive approaches to dream life reveals the compensatory and subversely liberating nature of the oneiric state in the life of the nun” (134). These compensatory and subversive qualities of her dream shed light on the subaltern nature of her waking life that necessitates the outlet that the dreams provide.

These exchanges, however, also offer another insight into Oria’s own personal agenda independent of Gonzalo’s. The dream follows the pattern of describing a group of people that confuse Oria: “una cosa estranna / ca nunca vido cosa daquésta su calanna” (52c-d). In response, the three virgins who accompany her clarify what she sees, transforming the visit to heaven into a

quest for knowledge. As Oria wondered about Christian theology and history, the Church would have promoted mysteries accepted on faith. However, rather than exercise faith during her oneiric conversations, Oria gains so much understanding that she leverages significant ontological advantage over any priest or religious scholar on earth. This knowledge empowers her to speak mysteries: “vedién que murmurava, mas no la entendién” (148b). Instead of silent to others out of subalternity and weakness, she chooses to withhold information as Munno, her mother, and others approach her for clarification. The tables have turned. In response to her mother’s petition “si visión vidiestes o alguna istoria, / dezítmelo de mentre avedes la memoria” (172c-d), Oria responds exasperated and almost coyly:

‘Madre,’ dijo la fija, ‘qué-m affincades tanto!
 Dexatme, ‘sí vos vala dios, el buen padre sancto:
 assaz tengo en mí lazerio e quebranto;
 más me pesa la lengua que un pesado canto.
 ‘Queredes que vos fable: yo non puedo hablar.
 Veedes que non puedo la palabra formar.
 Madre, si me quisieredes tan mucho afincar
 ante de la mi hora me puedo enfogar.
 ‘Madre, si dios quisiesse que podiesse bevir
 aún assaz tenía cosas que vos dezir,
 mas quando no lo quiere el criador soffrir
 lo que a él ploguiere es todo de soffrir.’ (173-175)

Unlike the country peasant child turned anchoress from whom mortality denied so much, she now denies the privilege of her knowledge to others. Despite claiming she cannot speak due to physical weakness, she manages to carry on for three *coplas* while her mother sustains only one in exchange. Even the information that she did apparently disclose riddles its readers and continues to confuse scholars today; she still seems to know something we do not. Matthew Desing agrees: “Although Amunna and Munno try twice to impose the authority of the written word on Oria’s visions, the protagonist resists the effort both times by withholding her words” (128). She remains an oral performer with power over her own expression until the end.

The exchange in which Amunna attempts to find out more about Oria’s visions marks a departure from the rest of the poem as a parley outside of a dream state as well as a time when Oria speaks discernably while she is awake. However, Oria truncates the interrogation because she does not yield any answers to Amunna. Oria’s ability to speak intimates her discernability, but she acts with agency, demonstrating that no earthly power need control her. While she speaks, mortals still do not get to understand her, anticipating the voice she will enjoy shortly thereafter when she inherits her heavenly throne, which is guarded curiously by a figure whose Latin name means “my voice.”

Thus, Oria’s dreams reward her with access to the ultimate authority, bypassing all earthly ones that fail to hear her. The three virgins declare that “envíanos don Christo de quien todo bien mana / que subas a los çielos e que veas que gana / el serviçio que fazes” (33b-d). Christ himself even addresses her later in the vision, promising that after she suffers a little longer on earth, “verná el tiempo de la siella cobrar” (102d). While she worries that she will not remain worthy, the Creator reassures her “de lo que tú más temes non serás enbargada” (107a). If Oria feels marginalized in her waking moments, this dream reassures her that the most important beings do hear her. “By

both rooting her more fully within her earthly identity as part of a community that had partially constrained her and by granting her a taste of complete spiritual freedom, the dream offers a form of consolation for a life situation deeply bereft of external power and authority” (Aquilano 135). Matthew Desing’s dissertation corroborates this position by recasting Oria’s visions as a pilgrimage:

Although Oria is a cloistered nun who would not normally be permitted to travel, through her visions she makes spiritual journeys to the heavenly realm. In these visionary travels, Oria witnesses several scenes that question normative gender roles, ecclesiastical hierarchies, and the primacy of written discourse over oral communication. (8)

Oria also mentions that “Christo [es] mi sennor natural” in her final monologue to her mother (191c), hinting that her earthly superiors were not. Many religious of the time laid claim on this concept as a means of shedding the oppression of earthly authority. On one occasion, she even excludes “el obispo don Gómez [. . .] / tal fue como el árbol que florez e non grana” from the heavenly throng (62a, c). As Desing has suggested, she finds ways in her dream to criticize some powerful members of the church hierarchy, elaborating that “Oria and Millán’s journeys are both spaces in which ecclesiastical authority is challenged [. . .]. Oria’s first journey contains a critique of Church hierarchy in that an important member of that hierarchy, a bishop, is conspicuously absent from heaven” (113). He attributes the resistance solely to Gonzalo, but the appearance of Oria’s teacher Urraca a little later in the poem underlines that Oria also engaged in such resistance since such a character would have interested Gonzalo little. While Desing notes the strange attribution of authority to the three virgins whom Oria so admired from her reading after having stripped it from the corrupt bishop, this attribution approximates her encounter with her teacher Urraca whom she “querría [. . .] que fuesse” in the company of the blessed (72c). Oria’s desire largely determines what she sees in the dream: virgins with authority, friends and mentors among the blessed, offenders excluded. Also weakening his own argument that only Gonzalo seeks an outlet for criticism here, Desing goes on to say, “It is significant that the virgins come closer to the top of the order than do the bishops in this progression of saintly authority, which is a subtle critique of both the established ecclesiastical and gender hierarchies” (114-115). After maintaining that Gonzalo is the reformist in the poem, this sentence points toward Oria. Why would reversing gender hierarchies interest Gonzalo? The poem contains acerbic criticisms of those in power; these not only further identify the reality of Oria’s strong presence in the production of the tale, but also disclose her own voice and opinion about matters religious.

As to the significance of the throne, Aquilano explains, “Finally, through her vision of the heavenly seat she was assured of a place of honor in the afterlife in which she would potentially claim an authority that her cultural conditioning and the prevailing social reality of gender relations had made completely inaccessible in her earthly travails” (155). Only the Church could offer her any comfort about her social position and pain. Rather than only oppressing her, the Church also acts as a conduit for liberation and self-realization. The throne represents the voice that Oria finds in her dream, as “[The throne] denotes the place where she recovers her voice in the presence of the divine [. . .]. Because she has done much to tame flesh and word, she has advanced towards the time when language is no longer mediated” (Weiss 77). Thus in her dreams, she finds both power and voice, defeating her own subalternity by forging an alternate reality through mysticism.

This most important moment of the poem highlights the metonymic force of reading Oria as a testimonial figure. This scene describes a throne “de oro bien labrada, / de piedras muy

preçiosas toda engastonada” promised to her if she continues faithful (77b-c). Next to the seat and guarding it stands a mysterious figure named Voxmea whose manner of dress conjures numerous invisible figures whom Oria typifies:²

Vistié esta mançeba preçiosa vestidura
 más preçiosa que oro, más que la seda pura.
 Era sobresennada de buena escriptura.
 Non cubrió omne vivo tan rica cobertura.
 Avié en ella nombres de omnes de grant vida
 que servieron a Christo con voluntat conplida,
 pero de los reclusos fue la mayor partida
 que domaron sus carnes a la mayor medida. (91-92)

The word “omnes” here does not mean “men”, but refers to people in general, including women, as does “reclusos” like Oria. Emily Francomano notices that the writing on Voxmea’s vestment “is devoted mainly to religious recluses such as Oria and her mother” (164), intimating an entire group of people not visible in the poem, yet connected to Oria. Likewise, Julian Weiss observes that she becomes a “penitential surrogate for the whole community” (75). That of Urraca “yo por la su doctrina entré entre paredes” (74c) rather than due to her parents or even God suggests solidarity among a class of women, a solidarity that extends to the possible effects of the poem on those who identified with Oria. As Aquilano explains, “The healing offered to Oria suggests answers to her that bring comfort to the recipients of the text as well” (147). She identifies with this group and reveres them and vice-versa, allowing her to represent with little record of them anywhere else, at least in the region of la Rioja in the eleventh to the thirteenth century.

Oria transcends her marginalization in such a way that even death, that which should most ultimately silence her, does not have power to quash her voice. While the hagiographers Munno and Gonzalo do obscure her, their own texts offer evidence of how she still breaks free and surpasses them as writers, to call us back to Nehamas’ distinction between writer and author. Following her death, they explain

Avié buenas conpannas en essi passamiento
 el buen abbat don Pedro, persona de buen tiento,
 monges e hermitannos, un general convento,
 éstos fazién obsequio e todo conplimiento. (178)

Don Pedro’s “conplimiento” is the first speech that begins to obscure the anchoress with post-mortem mythos. He must do so, however, in order to appropriate her power, given that so many “conpannas” show interest in her. In the immediate aftermath of her expressive life, many hear her or want to hear her. This begins the laborious process by the clergy of transforming her into a sign for the church and preventing others from seeing that while she showed great conformity to the church, she also dissented. During the eleventh century, the cult of saints still thrived outside of the hands of the church through the activities of the people. Of Oria and Amunna’s sepulcher, Gonzalo writes, “cuerpos son derecheros que sean adorados / ca suffrieron por Christo lazerios muy granados: / [. . .] que nos salve las almas, perdone los peccados” (183a, b, d). Their popularity

² Scholars have debated the meaning of the figure Voxmea for many years, but a discussion of such does not fall within the scope of this project. See Uría Maqua in her edition, Simina Farcasiu, Kevin Poole, and Anthony Lappin in the introduction to his edition.

among local worshippers persisted for at least two centuries, up until Gonzalo eulogized them, providing evidence of how the women were able to use the discourse of religious hegemony in order to be heard.

Oria literally transcends the silence of death when she appears to her mother at the end of the poem. As Mills points out, hagiography “refuses to acknowledge the threat that death poses to speech. [. . .] The martyr’s death does not put an end to the martyr’s voice, and the act of silencing conversely endows her speech with permanence and authority” (195). In other words, the saints keep talking after they are “silenced” by death.

The title *Poema de Santa Oria* reinforces Oria as a subaltern, a poetic much like Spivak’s sati, whilst the title *Vida de Santa Oria* sets the poetic Oria aside, and makes her mean something that matters, someone that speaks, someone other than a subaltern, someone with a life no matter to what degree others may have interfered with its redaction. This highlights the poetic function of marginalization imposed from without, but when allowed to author her own *vita*, the subaltern sets the rules and becomes her own, whether or not the hegemony chooses to hear her.

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