

**St. Catherine University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Bethsabe Huaman Andia, PhD**

---

2018

# Plath's Commandos: When Poetics are Politics

Bethsabe Huaman Andia, *St. Catherine University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/bethsabe-huamanandia/1/>

## Plath's Commandos: when poetics are politics<sup>1</sup>

Bethsabe Huaman Andia

Sunday June 26, 2015. Jesús García Sánchez, best known as Chus Visor, was interviewed by Nuria Azancot for *El Cultural*. He is a successful man of letters, forty-five of his seventy years he was an editor of Editorial Visor, one of the most prestigious publishers of poetry in Spain and Latin America. In the mentioned interview, he said that “There have been no female poets”, “since the generation of ‘98 and during all of the twentieth-century there has not been any great female poet.” Maybe with the intention of softening the impact of his words, he added: “some are good but for each good female poet there are at least five equivalent male poets”.<sup>2</sup>

Friday, July 1, 2015. The response didn't take long to show up. The Association of Women's Poets [Asociación Genialogías de Mujeres Poetas] created a petition entitled “Poetic Justice Now” [Justicia poética ya]. They proposed to veto Chus Visor being a member of the jury in any of the literary contest that occur in Spain, considering that most of the money for those contests came from public sources and that a person who openly expresses his beliefs about the inferiority of women's poetry is against equity and against the fair competition among men and women who write. The petition reached 2467 people, but nothing happened at the end. That same year, a book was published honoring Chus Visor for his long career and his efforts for Spanish literature. The blog One Hundred out of One Hundred [Cien de cien], was created to show all the Spanish female poets of the twentieth century, collecting poetry, some essays, anthologies, and information about those female poets that “doesn't exist.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Presented at South Central Modern Language Association 75th Annual Conference, October 11-14 2018, San Antonio, Texas.

<sup>2</sup> “Lo siento, pero creo que la poesía femenina en España no está a la altura de la otra, de la masculina, digamos, aunque tampoco es cosa de diferenciar. Desde luego, si vas a coger a las poetas desde el 98 para acá, es decir, todo el siglo XX, **no ves ninguna gran poeta, ninguna, comparable a lo que suponen en la novela Ana María Matute o Martín Gaité**. No hay una poeta importante ni en el 98, ni en el 27, ni en los 50, ni hoy. Hay muchas que están bien, como Elena Medel, pero no se la puede considerar, por una Medel hay cinco hombres equivalentes” [“Sorry, but I think female poetry in Spain is not up to the other, male, let's say, although it is not something to differentiate. Of course, if you are going to catch poets from 98 to here, that is, throughout the twentieth century, **you do not see any great poet, none, comparable to what they suppose in the novel Ana María Matute or Martín Gaité**. There is not an important poet in the 98, nor in the 27, nor in the 50, nor today. There are many that are good, like Elena Medel, but it can not be considered, for a Medel there are five equivalent men”], énfasis en el original.

Sunday, October 1, 2017. That day Plath's Commandos [Comando Plath] was created and published its first manifesto, entitled "How to fuck a female poet? First manifesto of Plath's Commandos [¿Cómo tira una poeta? Primer manifiesto del Comando Plath]". The first manifesto, more than a poem, is a collage or an exquisite corpse [cadáver exquisito], the Surrealist way to make a poem with the unconscious, in which all the writers that formed part of Plath's Commandos added a line from their social media accounts: the insults, the double-entendres, the misogynistic comments, the threats, the unwelcomed invitations to fuck, the disparagement of their poetry, the disparagement of them:

"Don't talk about your poetry, talk about you, baby" [No me hables de tus poemas, háblame de ti baby].

"You would be a better poet with less clothes on" [Serías mejor poeta con un poco menos de ropa].

"You seem to be dumber in your poems" [Pareces más tonta en tus poemas].

"With who did you sleep to be invited to this poetry festival?" [¿Con quiénes te has encamado para que te inviten a este festival de poesía?].

"You should be more feminine in your poetry" [Deberías ser más femenina en tu poesía].

"You write like a man" [Escribes como hombre].

"For sure your ex gave you the idea" [Seguro que fue tu ex el que te dio la idea].

"I like your poetry a lot. Let's go out, we'll talk about it and I will give you some recommendations about what to read" [Me gustó mucho tu poesía, ¿te parece si te invito a salir, hablamos de ella y te recomiendo qué leer?]

Tuesday, October 24, 2017. Plath's Commandos published the second manifesto entitled "The lyric self will howl while we live in a country of rapists. Second manifesto of Plath's Commandos" [El yo lírico aullará mientras viva en un país de violadores. Segundo manifiesto del Comando Plath]. The Second manifesto is aggressive, violent, and certainly polemical. Most intellectuals rejected the expression of violence from the mouths of women and in relation with poetry, which, according to them, should be far removed from gender issues because it is pure and asexual. The first manifesto was a product of women being tired of being constantly assaulted by words and by bodies. The second manifesto was a product of impotence, after the injustice and social support of rapists. Two women, one brutally hit by a man in a hotel and the other burned by a stalker on a bus, were both blamed for the violence they received. The men are found not guilty, they are released, they are free, "they didn't want to kill them," is the conclusion of the law because the only proof of the intent to kill is a dead body –it doesn't matter that at that point it will be too late. So sorry for women. Most men can't understand what it means to live in a country, in a

society, in a world where women are treated like they are stupid, like they are trash. Plath's Commandos understood it and decided to speak out.

The lyric self will show its teeth the next time they say "poetess" [El Yo lírico mostrará los dientes la próxima vez que le digan "poetisa"].

The lyric self got tired of reading the same names in the encyclopedias. She has decided to erase from the old dictionaries all the words that made her presence invisible [El Yo lírico se cansó de leer los mismos nombres en las enciclopedias. Ha decidido borrar de los viejos diccionarios todas las palabras que volvieron invisible su presencia].

The lyric self says: Papi, no longer, you no longer serve me black shoe, I had to kill you like Silvia with the impurity of my mother tongue. [El Yo lírico dice: Papi, ya no, ya no me sirves zapato negro, he tenido que matarte como Silvia con la impureza de mi lengua materna].

I will use this context to talk about the relation between poetics and politics, framed by Gender Studies. I will discuss the idea of a "great literature" supposedly free of gender bias and the obstacles that women face in the present, twenty-first century, to be recognized as poets. Not for nothing under the umbrella of Sylvia Plath, one of world's most famous and greatest poets of all times, we will also discuss why and to which extent the dramatic life of Plath is still an inspiration for young women poets of Latin America to fight for their right to be known.

Let's start from the beginning. Poetry or lyric, as it was called in Safo's time, has always being a practice that women have done. In the early days of Iberian Peninsula, women developed the so-called *jarchas* a final couplet in Romance language or in vulgar Arabic language whose themes were the songs of women, lyrics in which the woman expresses her amorous desire, therefore considered obscene.<sup>3</sup> Some women of the Middle Ages have been forgotten, their names erased by time, but their *jarchas* still exist. In Latin America, in the oral poetry tradition that was developed before the Spaniards arrived to indigenous lands, women sang their poetry in song, a practiced which has endured until now. In Colonial times, despite the many restrictions that women had for learning and studying, we find a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Amarilis and a long list of women poets. During the twentieth century and especially during the '70s and '80s, the most

---

<sup>3</sup> *jarcha* copla final en lengua romance o en lengua árabe vulgar cuya temática eran las canciones de mujeres, lírica en la que la mujer expresa su deseo amoroso, por ello consideradas obscenas. La voz de la jarcha podía ser un grupo, un animal o una ciudad, además de otras posibilidades (Rubiera Mata, Rosen).

important event in literature was the massive and creative presence of female poets, publishing and reciting throughout the Hispanic world.

We can be sure that these poets who survived time and oblivion were not the only ones, “For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women’s experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others”(Robinson 106). As Lilian Robinson said, feminist literary critics have demonstrated, in conjunction with scholars from history, philosophy, art and science, there have been women in each and every field of knowledge. Nowadays, there are an overwhelming number of studies that recall those forgotten names of women who have made substantial contributions to the fields they cultivated and mastered, against the furious resistance of a male majority.<sup>4</sup>

So, saying that there are no female poets in the twentieth century is neither a true nor a false statement: it is a provocation. The statement is not about the quality of the poetry, it is about the identity of the poet, it is making an equivalency between women and bad poetry, an equivalency that includes in the same sack hundreds of different women, styles, ideas, words. It is not necessary to be very wise to assume the impossibility of a statement like that, such a wide generalization can’t be truth. So, it tells us very little about female poetry, but it tells a lot about the person who said it. He is a healthy and arrogant son of the patriarchy, that believes women are inferior by nature, it means that there is nothing we can do to change a universal rule: the superiority of men over women.

We may assume that gentlemen who reject women poets have read their poetry. But I can assure you they didn’t because, at least in Peru, he would have needed to contact the poet directly and buy the books from her. Most of the books published by female writers in Lima are authors’ publications, published in small numbers and not widely distributed by publishers. If it happened that the poet was well-known, anyway he would have need to go to a personal library of a friend or, again, contact that poet, to find the book because especially if the book is ten or fifteen years old it would for sure be sold-out from book stores and older book shops. Most of the time female writers’ books never see a second edition. This gentleman

---

<sup>4</sup> A good example is the collection *Women’s History [Historia de las mujeres]*, edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot. It was published in five volumes, from Antiquity to the twentieth-century.

would have to look for anthologies of female poetry to read the most celebrated poets, but that wouldn't be enough to form an opinion. So, only considering all the effort and time he would have needed in order to read all the poetry written by women, how much time he would need to read it closely, and with the proper time to make conclusions, we see that this is a very unlikely scenario.

After this explanation of what would have been necessary to say with any authority that there are no female poets in Spain, in Peru, or in any part of the world, I can assure you that this gentlemen didn't do that effort. He realized that there are no female poets in the books he has on his book shelves, which may say more about his bad taste or at least his bias, than about women poetry. He realized that there are no female poets in the anthologies he has been reading in the last years, --by the way, selected and published by men, just by coincidence his friends and just by coincidence the same anthologies in which he is obviously included. He realized that there are no female poets among his friends, also poets, but again that tells us more about his social limitations than about women poetry.

Then after that "accurate" methodology this gentlemen followed --checking on his bookshelves and among his friends for women poets--, he screamed to the wind that there are no women poets, which really means, to him, that there are no women poets he knows or likes, and as he is the center of the universe, then he expected us all to agree with him. After that he would expect that, any woman poet, if such a thing existed, would run to his door, introduce herself, leave in his hands her books and implore him to read them and hopefully like them. Which, obviously never happened. What women did was created the petition "Poetic Justice Now" or Plath's Commandos which is maybe the equivalent of knocking on his door and punching him in the face, which he obviously didn't expect from a lady. This happened because there are sometimes in life when nice ladies become furious guerrillas, and this is good thing when it happens. Female poets realized, the same way suffragettes historically realized --beautifully depicted by Sarah Gravon in her movie *Suffragette* of 2015--, that violence is the language of men, dominant men, and that we need to speak their language in order to be heard.

As far as I know, it is the responsibility of the critic to find his own sources. Isn't great when we open a book and we immediately have an idea to develop? Isn't it great when we formulate a question and to

answer it we are challenged to look for books that may contradict our hypothesis? I will tell you if you ask me, that knowing women poetry is a matter of will, a matter of effort, a matter of politics. Because politics come before poetics, because for women if there are no politics to consider and put on the table, we will never see or find their poetics. Because the same way suffragettes bombed the streets of London, Plath's *Commandos* is bombing with bitter words our senses and ideal of literature. Because today more than ever, in the vicinity of a new fascist conquering of the world and of the word, the private is political, and politics also need to be poetic.

In the context of Spain, as well as in Peruvian *machinario* (Silva Santisteban)<sup>5</sup>, Chus Visor equated inclusion in anthologies or publications with good poetry, another wide generalization that is easily questionable. But there is another way to approach this problem in relation to the few number of female poets in anthologies and those that have been published, in a world where men consider women inferior, in a society where doors are closed to women poetry books, we can think that with everything pitted against them, women poetry continues to exist, to live, and that is amazing. So, if we took that as a criteria to decide if there is good poetry or bad poetry, we have to give the prize to women who are still fighting against so many obstacles, and we need to take away merit from those men who have all the privileges, the privileges of their sex, they just need to write, so to say, they have everything else served on a platter.<sup>6</sup>

Let's take the example of Sylvia Plath. Why did Peruvian writers take her name for their fight? Plath is seen as the epitome of the female poet dilemma. She suffered from the abandonment of her husband, who couldn't support her emotionally or economically, as well as professionally, in the understanding that being both poets, their marriage could become a fruitful relation between two colleagues who talk the same specialized language. Plath decided not to accept the double life that would have meant staying with her husband who had chosen to be with another woman, therefore she was marginalized from the benefits of being his wife. She was not only geographically apart from him but also separated by her duties as a

---

<sup>5</sup> *Machinario* is the way some Peruvian feminist critics call the hidden machinery of machismo.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that every female poet is good just because she is a woman, but it is necessary to understand poetry as a tradition in which women need to create their own path that will include different levels of ability. A good discussion of this idea can be found in Gill.

mother, as it was common at that time, but even now, for men to consider it the women's responsibility to raise children. This way of life was overwhelming for the young mother and jeopardized the young poet, to the point to that life opposed poetry. Sylvia Plath chose poetry.

Even if we choose not to judge Ted Hughes too harshly—he isn't directly to blame for the death of Sylvia, after all—clearly he contributed to her despair. Incredibly, though, after her death he had no problem introducing her poetry to the public, publishing all of Plath's work, including her personal diaries. After her death, he continued controlling and dictating the path of Plath's intellectual and literary heritage. As Carol Muske said: "The point is that Plath and her suicide persona became one. Clearly, she herself chose to end her life. But did she intend that her book (a book she dedicated to her children) be read as evidence of self-destruction? We will not know"(9).

Maybe the metaphor of her grave as is detailed by Elisabeth Bronfen can serve as a metaphor of what Peruvian Plath's Commandos wants to reclaim from Sylvia Plath's figure. Bronfen explains how in 1989 it was discovered that the grave of Sylvia Plath was unmarked, which is to say she was disappeared as a memory and as a symbol. The explanation was that feminists, who are always to blame for the most bizarre situations, had vandalized the grave as it was marked as "Sylvia Plath Hughes." I won't explain in depth the problem, I will only say that there are many ways to erase, dismiss, or reject a female poetry, one is naming her with the name of her husband, the other is erasing her name completely.

What Plath's Commandos see in Sylvia Plath is a poet who despite the fact that she had everything against her, continued writing poetry until the end. In spite of all the changes that her husband made to look better among her words, today we can see the original version of *Ariel* and recover the original idea that Plath wanted to send to the future. Her book was a time capsule. What is true is, as Mark Wunderlich said "Plath was speaking to a new generation, and mostly she was speaking to women"(38), the way she spoke to the Peruvian poets who take her name as a flag, because they understand the kind of emotional chaos that means to be a poet among men.

After presenting the scenario in which female poets have to produce or try to produce their literary work I will finish with a definition of what I am referring to when I talk about poetics and politics. As María

Eugenia Ulfe has mentioned, in relation with popular art, there is a political component in the creativity process, what female poets decide to use as topics or metaphors in their writing, but it is also political when a literary critic or a male poet announces that there is no good female poetry or that there is no female poetry at all. Politics are the ways in which artists negotiate their art and navigate the social space in which it will be received among different people and social groups (Ulfe 171). And the poetic is the way the author negotiates with the words and with what she wants to express. One is the negotiation to the outside and the other to the inside, in ways that may establish interconnections or sometimes preconditions as in this scenario about female poets in Spain, Peru, or the United States. So, art is not and I think it was never that abstract and pure sphere of creativity but a means by which the artist expresses but also talks with society, if the society allows it. Or using Julia Kristeva's explanation of the signifying process, the subject is always semiotic and symbolic, it is marked by both (24). That is why in some respects, poetry can't be just explained by poetry, poets live in a society, and are raised in a family, are encouraged or discouraged to write, and that has an impact, a political impact on their poetics.

## **Bibliography**

- Azancot, Nuria. "Chus Visor: Dicen que los novelistas son vanidosos, pero ¡hay cada poeta!" [Online]. *El Cultural*, 26 de junio, 2015. [www.elcultural.com/revista/letras/Chus-Visor-Dicen-que-los-novelistas-son-vanidosos-pero-hay-cada-poeta/36667?intcmp=HEMSUPL](http://www.elcultural.com/revista/letras/Chus-Visor-Dicen-que-los-novelistas-son-vanidosos-pero-hay-cada-poeta/36667?intcmp=HEMSUPL) (visitado 20 sept. 2018).
- Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Sylvia Plath*. Second Edition. United Kingdom: Northcote House Publishers, 2004.
- "Cien de cien. Poetas españolas del siglo XX" [Blog] [ciendecien.tumblr.com](http://ciendecien.tumblr.com) (visitado 20 sep. 2018)
- Comando Plath. Página oficial. [comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/24/el-yo-lirico-aullara-mientras-viva-en-un-pais-de-violadores/](http://comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/24/el-yo-lirico-aullara-mientras-viva-en-un-pais-de-violadores/)(visitado 20 de sept. 2018).
- . "¿Cómo tira una poeta? Primer manifiesto del Comando Plath", 1 de octubre 2017. [comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/01/primer-entrada-del-blog/](http://comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/01/primer-entrada-del-blog/)

- . “El yo lírico aullará mientras viva en un país de violadores. Segundo manifiesto del Comando Plath”, 24 de octubre 2017. [comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/24/el-yo-lirico-aullara-mientras-viva-en-un-pais-de-violadores/](http://comandoplath.wordpress.com/2017/10/24/el-yo-lirico-aullara-mientras-viva-en-un-pais-de-violadores/)
- Duby, Georges y Michelle Perrot. *Historia de las mujeres*. Madrid: Taurus, 2000.
- Jo Gill. *Women's Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Justicia poética ya. [www.change.org/p/a-los-responsables-del-área-de-cultura-de-instituciones-públicas-aytos-diputaciones-etc-justicia-poética-ya-706bfaf2-6165-4989-8e94-fad342ff9c63](http://www.change.org/p/a-los-responsables-del-área-de-cultura-de-instituciones-públicas-aytos-diputaciones-etc-justicia-poética-ya-706bfaf2-6165-4989-8e94-fad342ff9c63)
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Muske, Carol. *Women and Poetry. Truth, Autobiography, and the Shape of the Self*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Robinson, Lilian S. “Treasure Our Text. Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon”. *The new feminist criticism*. Edited by Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon books, 1985. 105-121.
- Rosen, Tova. “The Muwashshah”. *The Literature of Al-Andalus*. Editor by M.R. Menocal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 165-189.
- Rubiera Mata, María Jesús. *Poesía femenina hispanoárabe*. Salamanca: Instituto de la Mujer y Editorial Castalia, 1989.
- . “La voz de las poetisas en Al-Andalus y la problemática de la voz femenina literaria medieval”. *La voz del silencio I. Fuentes directas para la historia de las mujeres (Siglos VIII-XVIII)*. Editora Cristina Segura Graiño. Madrid: A.C. Almudayna, 1992. 65-70.
- Silva Santisteban, Rocío. “El machinario”. *La República*, 4 de marzo 2007. [larepublica.pe/archivo/256410-kolumna-okupa-el-machinario](http://larepublica.pe/archivo/256410-kolumna-okupa-el-machinario)
- Uffe, María Eugenia. *Cajones de la memoria. La historia reciente del Perú a través de los retablos andinos*. Lima: Fondo Editorial Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2011.
- “Una del montón”. *El Mundo*, 7 de julio, 2015. [www.elmundo.es/madrid/2015/07/07/5599791cca47411a3e8b4586.html](http://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2015/07/07/5599791cca47411a3e8b4586.html)

Wiener, Gabriela. "Escritoras peruanas en la trinchera del feminismo". [Online] *El País*, 8 de febrero, 2018.

[elpais.com/elpais/2018/02/01/eps/1517508966\\_147698.html?id\\_externo\\_rsoc=FB\\_EPS\\_CM](http://elpais.com/elpais/2018/02/01/eps/1517508966_147698.html?id_externo_rsoc=FB_EPS_CM)

Wunderlich, Mark. "Laying Blame: The Legacy of Sylvia Plath". *Academy of American Poets*. Fall/Winter

2013, Vol. 45, p37-40.