

SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ: IN DEFENSE OF FEMININE INTELLECT

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The opening line of Emily Dickinson's Poem 126 declares, "The brain is wider than the sky." Rene Descartes' assertion, "I think, therefore I exist" (*cogito ergo sum*), adds further emphasis to the importance and powers of the human intellect to seek wisdom and understanding. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz joins company with these well-known writers' claims when she states, "...and as Christ is the King of wisdom, He was the first to wear that crown; and as it was sanctified on His brow, it removed all fear and dread from those who are wise, for they know they need to aspire to no other honor" (*Reply to Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 1691). As Dickinson explores the brain's power, breadth, and creativity, Descartes points to the defining nature of the human mind. To these perspectives, Sor Juana attests to the divine origin and nature of intellectual inclinations. This provides powerful evidence in her defense of women's intellectual rights that she so earnestly sought in her struggle with religious authorities as well as within herself. While in her *Reply* Sor Juana emphasizes the impossibility of attaining total knowledge through rational or intuitive means, nevertheless throughout her life she demonstrated a relentless thirst for acquiring a measure of wisdom within the finitude of human existence.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) in her *Reply to Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (*Respuesta a Sor Filotea*) dated March 1, 1691, offers a feminine voice speaking out amidst a patriarchal, Enlightenment society in seventeenth-century Mexico. A spirited defense of female intellectual pursuits flows from the pen of this Mexican nun in an epistolary response to Father Manuel Fernandez de Santa Cruz, the Bishop of Puebla. In addressing the Bishop's attack on her right to scholarship and literary expression, Sor Juana's letter exudes satire, rage, and determination to defend her pursuit of the life of the mind. While asserting her rights, she speaks for other women as well. The power of her pen and expansive intellect becomes clear as she develops her argument with biblical

allusions, theological quotations, and classical references. Her list of historical evidence of notable women from the past supplies ample examples to persuade the reader of the breadth of her scholarship and her thirst for knowledge. To this she adds an autobiographical account of her intellectual inquiry to promote her self-defense.

Understanding the context in which she wrote the letter guides the reader in perceiving her motivation and tone. In 1690, she wrote a commentary on a sermon delivered forty years earlier by the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira, a sermon in which he disputed with Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas about the nature of Christ's greatest expression of love at His life's end. Sor Juana's commentary, in the form of a letter (known as *Crisis of a Sermon*), was published without her consent by the Bishop of Puebla. The Bishop gave Sor Juana's letter the title, *Athenagoric Letter (Carta Atenagórica)* or letter worthy of the wisdom of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. He then prefixed his own letter to Sister Juana signed with a pseudonym "Filotea de la Cruz." He advised the nun to turn away from her studies: "You have wasted much time in the study of philosophers and poets; now is the time to perfect your means and improve your occupation" (Tucker, 1987, p. 213). In her *Reply* she nominally accepted the Bishop's rebuke. Her reply, in the words of Anne Fremantle (1977), "is one of the glories of early Latin-American literature, and one of the most remarkable pieces of writing ever produced by a woman" (p. 129). Underlying her elegant prose and learned argument in the response, however, are both rage at the Bishop's patriarchal attitude and determination to defend her pursuit of knowledge and critical inquiry.

Throughout Sor Juana's letter, satiric irony frequently emerges as she directly addresses the Bishop by his feminine pseudonym (a nun could not write to a man in this era). Her first line begins with "My most illustrious *señora*, dear lady" (Peden, 1982, p. 405). She continues throughout the letter to pause briefly to reiterate the feminine address as she bombards the Bishop with her wealth of knowledge of the Bible, theologians, and church scholars. All the while, she emphasizes her quest to study theology by offering a well reasoned argument that she proposed to herself: "I strove mightily to elevate these studies, to dedicate them to His service, as the goal to which I aspired was to study Theology—it seeming to me debilitating for a Catholic not to know everything in this

life of the Divine Mysteries that can be learned through natural means—and, being a nun and not a layperson, it was seemly that I profess my vows to learning through ecclesiastical channels...” (p. 410). To the reader, the letter itself is a rigorous exercise in comprehending the copious references to religious personages from the past. Her prolific knowledge of religious leaders from the Old and New Testaments as well as theological scholars serves as ironic testimony to her breadth of understanding of the Bible and theology. From the beginning of the letter, she totally undermines the Bishop’s rebuke that she should tend to religious affairs as she refers to St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, who pursued scholasticism in the Middle Ages. She continues by pointing to King Saul, the mother of John the Baptist, and the virgin Mary in her examination of how she should respond to the Bishop. The religious and biblical figures all become relevant to her feigned, deferential tone.

Sor Juana’s argument pauses to digress into an examination of “silence” as she states “I beg you, lady, to forgive this digression to which I was drawn by the power of truth, and, if I am to confess all the truth, I shall confess that I cast about for some manner by which I might flee the difficulty of a reply, and was sorely tempted to take refuge in silence” (p. 406). Her dissection of the word “silence” provides a window into the power of her intellectual inquiry. She turns the term around, discusses every angle of possible meaning, and brings in Saint Paul, Saint John, and Antonio Vieira (the subject of her earlier criticism) as examples of people who have commented on silence. After a lengthy commentary on the term, she concludes, “...not speaking is not the same as having nothing to say, but rather being unable to express the many things there are to say” (p. 406). Furthermore, she continues to meticulously examine her own observations in her response to “silence” by using a variety of literary examples to further her case in explaining her ultimate decision to respond to the Bishop. References to Moses and the Pharaoh, Ahasuerus (King of Persia), Saint Jerome, Seneca (Roman philosopher) expand her observations on “silence.” Her literary skill, argumentative expertise, powers of logic, and wealth of knowledge emerge in this one short section of the letter.

With skillful interweaving of more and more evidence of her knowledge that she acquired by reading the thousands of books that she had collected, she explains how secular studies (ones that the Bishop

criticized) are essential to biblical studies. She provides a quote from the Book of Job, where God says to Job, “Shalt thou be able to join together the shining stars the Pleiades, or canst thou stop the turning about of Arcturus? Canst thou bring forth the day star in its time, and make the evening star to rise upon the children of the earth?” (p. 411). She then points out that without knowledge of Astrology each question would not be understood. Continuing her argument through the Socratic method of questioning, she bombards the reader with example upon example of the necessity of understanding biblical passages within a secular context. Pointing to music, she asks whether in Genesis 18.23—33 a reader could fully comprehend Abraham’s plea to God to save Sodom for the sake of its just inhabitants (p. 413). Abraham’s numerous references to musical terminology such as Mi, Re, octaves, and the diapason to illustrate his argument demonstrate the crucial need to fully comprehend musical terms. Sor Juana’s argumentative powers become clear as she demonstrates not only her knowledge of the Bible but her expansive forays into secular studies, all the while stressing the importance of contextual knowledge in understanding the Scriptures.

In another major section of the *Letter*, Sor Juana shifts into autobiographical accounts of her quest for knowledge and desire for freedom to pursue scholarship. She first addresses her attackers such as the Bishop by stating, “Be assured, lady, it is often that I have meditated on how one who distinguishes himself—or one on whom God chooses to confer distinction, for it is only He who may do so—is received as a common enemy, because it seems to some that he usurps the applause they deserve, or that he dams up the admiration to which they aspired, and so they persecute that person” (414). In keeping with her established pattern of providing copious examples, she provides a list of others who have been attacked for their mental abilities and quest for knowledge. References to Roman orators, Athenians, Machiavelli, St. Peter, and the Pharisees’ attack on Christ flow from her pen. She explains that often the most prominent people will suffer attack on their powers of reasoning: “...but the eminence that undergoes the most severe attack is that of reason. First, because it is the most defenseless, for riches and power strike out against those who dare attack them; but not so reason, for while it is the greater it is more modest and long-suffering, and defends itself less” (415). By providing a metaphor of Christ wearing a crown of thorns,

she vividly depicts the suffering that can occur for those whose wisdom must suffer extreme persecution. To this she adds that she too has been persecuted not for her wisdom but for her love of wisdom and letters, having achieved neither one nor the other (p. 417). Sor Juana's philosophical perspective on human ability to achieve total understanding reveals a skeptical attitude. Nevertheless, she uses her own knowledge and tools of rhetoric—analogy, logic, examples, and personal experience—to further her argument.

Her autobiographical account of how she responded to the religious authorities attacking her scholarship and need to learn depicts a woman whose mind defined her existence, and the personal experience serves as her self-defense. Her narrative explaining her inclination to letters reveals a child prodigy who began reading at age three, a young woman who cut her hair as punishment for not learning Latin quickly, and a nun who resorted to “reading her environment” when church authorities removed her books. Any distractions from studies cause her to struggle, as she reveals that by joining the convent she hoped to pursue scholarship while avoiding family responsibilities. She loves the sisters of her Jeronymite Order, but her compulsion to learn is more powerful. Consequently, her thirst for knowledge often torments her as she struggles with her obligations to the convent and her propensity for scholarship.

As Sor Juana continues to analyze her own learning process, she reveals that she studies numerous topics simultaneously, and continues to affirm that God is the source of all things, all learning—its process, its fulfillment, its connections. She states, “...God has granted me the mercy of loving truth...which is that from the moment I was first illuminated by the light of reason, my inclination toward letters has been so vehement, so overpowering, that not even the admonitions of others—and I have suffered many—nor my own meditations—and they have not been few—have been sufficient to cause me to forswear this natural impulse that God placed in me: the Lord God knows why, and for what purpose” (p. 408). The biographical sketch of her mind, its workings and propensities provides a thorough epistemological argument. At the same time, her personal journey indicates the challenges that confronted her intellectual pursuits. All the while, she affirms that her ability to acquire total knowledge is impossible because of her ineptitude and inadequacy of intelligence, not from the variety of subjects that she pursued. However,

she successfully uses her autobiography to argue for the right of women to pursue the life of the mind—a universal appeal for women’s rights.

Sor Juana gains inspiration for scholarship from numerous women—secular and biblical—from the past. She draws on history for evidence of female intellectual power. She enhances her argument for her feminine right to study by pointing to the many accomplishments of women such as Deborah, a prophetess who judged the Israelites (Judges 4.4-14), and the wise Queen of Sheba, who tested King Solomon with questions (1 Kings 10.1—3). The names of illustrious women in Old Testament stories—Esther, Abigail, Rehab, Anna—spew forth. To these she adds secular, female prophets and learned women from the ancient world—Zenobia, Arete, Hypatia, Leontium, and Julia. Mythological figures such as Minerva (or Athena, goddess of wisdom) and the Sibyls add to her evidence of female accomplishments and influence as well as religious figures such as St. Gertrude, St. Catherine, and St. Teresa de Ávila. These copious examples become a mental exercise in itself as the reader ponders the names in an effort to comprehend all the historical females. Irony exists in the fact that the list requires so much annotation—the names of these notable women are hardly household words. Furthermore, not to overlook her examples close to home, she states, “I see my most holy mother Paula, learned in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and most able in interpreting the Scriptures” (p. 420).

In addition, Sor Juana skillfully introduces St. Jerome, the founder of her Jeronymite order, as a primary example of one who promoted female learning. St. Jerome states in “To Leta, Upon the Education of Her Daughter,” “Accustom her tongue, still young, to the sweetness of the Psalms. Even the names through which little by little she will become accustomed to form her phrases should not be chosen by chance, but selected and repeated with care; the prophets must be included, of course, and the apostles, as well, and all the Patriarchs beginning with Adam and down to Matthew and Luke, so that as she practices other things she will be readying her memory for the future” (p. 422). In his epistles, St. Jerome honors such women as Eustochium, Fabiola, Marcella, and Pacatula. St. Jerome’s epistemology, while emphasizing the Scriptures as a basis for female learning, reaffirms Sor Juana’s argument that females have a right to scholarship in the first place. Sor Juana argues that women such as Leta have been teachers of children through the ages and have a need for

scholarship to guide them in the process. She even challenges the role of men teaching young women, pointing to the possible peril of temptation. Her argument legitimizes the role of female teachers who in turn must pursue intellectual activity and scholarship. This adds to her larger argument that denies that intelligence or a thirst for knowledge should be a sex-limited characteristic.

The ironic ending to Sor Juana's life serves as testimony to the influence of society and religious authorities over the right of female pursuit of learning. Her Enlightenment society, which on one hand extolled the virtues of the intellect, on the other denied or discouraged female intellectual pursuits. Society determined that scholarship was a sex-limited characteristic. Religious authorities such as the Bishop of Puebla affirmed this narrow perspective by criticizing, admonishing, and silencing Sor Juana. At the end of her life, Ramón Xirau (1967) says that she began on the "road of silence...each day less dedicated to books and more dedicated to charity; every time less given to scientific experiments and more drawn to spiritual exercises. Her confessor says, "She does not run in virtue but flies." Silences, devotions, little writing; silences which will last till the 17th of April 1695, when she succumbed to the plague which was overtaking the convent of Saint Jerome" (p. 158). Beatriz Couch (1985) argues that Sor Juana underwent a mystical experience at the end of her life. It seems logical, however, that societal pressures took their toll on her as she perhaps convinced herself that she had disrupted the natural order of the universe—the Chain of Being—and the microcosm of that order in society—the subservient role of women. Her challenge to that hierarchical order, in her mind, may have broken a link in the chain by challenging the status quo. In 1694, a year before her death, Sor Juana wrote *Profession of the Faith Signed With Her Own Blood* (*La protesta que rubrica con su sangre*) where she completely surrenders into the hands of God, as well as the church, with a deep sense of God's will and justice (Couch, 1985, p. 53).

Sor Juana's scholarship and literary pursuits encompassed a variety of genres—poetry, drama, treatises, letters, and polemics. Her letter demonstrates the powers of her mind to cogently respond to the Bishop of Puebla with an argument shaped by all the rhetorical tools: logic, critical thinking, analogy, knowledge, personal experience, appeal to religious and secular authorities, Socratic questioning, and copious examples. The

ancient Greek approach to argument based on logos, ethos, and pathos appeals abound throughout the epistolary defense of the feminine intellect. She speaks out for herself, yet her appeal is a universal cry for women's rights. Her *Letter to Sister Filotea*, published posthumously in 1700, places her in the category of one of the great minds of world history. Certainly, her mind defined who she was. Surely, her brain was as expansive as the sky as her creative thinking soared. The Hispanic/Latino appellation calling her the "Tenth Muse" rings true for Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

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