

The Poet's Answer to the Most Illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz

by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648 or 1651-1695) was born in Mexico then called New Spain. Her parents who were criollos, that is people of Spanish descent born in Mexico, were not married, and after two more children were born, the father left the family. Juana spent her early childhood on her maternal grandfather's large ranch in Nepantla, which her mother, though illiterate, helped to manage. Her grandfather was a well-educated man with a large library, and when Juana learned to read, she devoured his books. She learned Latin, too, at an early age, and began writing poetry as a young teenager.

As an illegitimate girl without a dowry, yet with beauty, charm, and learning, she entered the court of Viceroy the Marquis of Mancera and his wife as a lady-in-waiting. The priest Antonio Núñez de Miranda encouraged her to enter a convent to continue her studies. The Viceroy and his wife became her financial patrons. She amassed a library, eventually the largest in New Spain, and Sor Juana produced a large body of literary work.

In 1690, the bishop of Puebla asked Sor Juana to write him a letter detailing her theological criticisms of a famous sermon which the bishop had heard her discuss at the convent. Without Sor Juana's consent, he published the letter. Identifying its author, he prefaced the work with a letter of his own published under the feminine pen name (such as priests often adopted when writing advice to nuns) "Sor Filotea de la Cruz." The letter, while praising Sor Juana's brilliance, cautioned her against secular study and writing of any kind, and against further pursuit of the masculine field of theology.

Sor Juana wrote this excerpted response. It is a defense of her own life as a writer and scholar, and an impassioned plea for all women's rights to intellectual development. The bishop did not publish it nor, so far as is known, respond to it in any way.

She is now regarded as the most important poet of colonial Mexico and the most important woman writer of colonial Spanish America.

The Poet's Answer

If studies, my Lady, be merits (for indeed I see them extolled as such in men), in me they are no such thing: I study because I must. If they be a failing, I believe for the same reason that the fault is none of mine. Yet withal, I live always so wary of myself that neither in this nor in anything else do I trust my own judgment. And so I entrust the decision to your supreme skill and straightway submit to whatever sentence you may pass, posing no objection or reluctance, for this has been no more than a simple account of my inclination to letters.

I confess also that, while in truth this inclination has been such that, as I said before, I had no need of exemplars, nevertheless the many books that I have read have not failed to help me, both in sacred as well as secular letters. For there I see a Deborah issuing laws, military as well as political, and governing the people among whom there were so many learned men. I see the exceedingly knowledgeable Queen of Sheba, so learned she dares to test the wisdom of the wisest of all wise men with riddles, without being rebuked for it; indeed, on this very account she is to become the judge of the unbelievers. I see so many and such significant women: some adorned with the gift of prophecy, like an Abigail; others, of persuasion, like Esther; others, of piety, like Rahab; others, of perseverance, like Anna [Hannah] the mother of Samuel; and others, infinitely more, with other kinds of qualities and virtues.

If I consider the Gentiles, the first I meet are the Sibyls, chosen by God to prophesy the essential mysteries of our Faith in such learned and elegant verses that they stupefy the imagination. I see a woman such as Minerva, daughter of great Jupiter and mistress of all the wisdom of Athens, adored as goddess of the sciences. I see one Polla Argentaria, who helped Lucan, her husband, to write the *battle of Pharsalia*. I see the daughter of the divine Tiresias, more learned still than her father. I see, too, such a woman as Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrians, as wise as she was courageous. Again, I see an Arete, daughter of Aristippus, most learned. A Nicostrata, inventor of Latin letters and most erudite in the Greek. An Aspasia Miletia, who taught philosophy and rhetoric and was the teacher of the philosopher Pericles. An Hypatia, who taught astrology and lectured for many years in Alexandria. A leontium, who won over the philosopher Theophrastus and proved him wrong. A Julia, a Corinna, a Cornelia; and, in sum, the vast throng of women who merited titles and earned renown: now as Greeks, again as Muses, and yet again as Pythonesses. For what were they all but learned women, who were considered, celebrated, and indeed venerated as such in Antiquity? Without mentioning still others, of Catherine, lecturing and refuting all the learning of the most learned men of Egypt. I see a Gertrude read, write, and teach. And seeking no more examples far from home, I see my own most holy mother Paula, learned in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin tongues and most expert in the interpretation of the Scriptures. What wonder then can it be that, though her chronicler was no less than the unequalled Jerome, the Saint found himself scarcely worthy of the task, for with that lively gravity and energetic effectiveness with which only he can express himself, he says: "If all the parts of my body were tongues, they would not suffice to proclaim the learning and virtues of Paula." Blessilla, a widow, earned the same praises, as did the luminous virgin Eustochium, both of them daughters of the Saint herself [Paula]; and indeed Eustochium was such that for her knowledge she was hailed as a World Prodigy. Fabiola, also a Roman, was another most learned in Holy Scripture. Proba Falconia, a Roman woman, wrote an elegant book of centos, joining

together verses from Virgil, on the mysteries of our holy Faith. Our Queen Isabella, wife of Alfonso X is known to have written on astrology—without mentioning others, whom I omit so as not merely to copy what others have said (which is a vice I have always detested): Well then, in our own day there thrive the great Christina Alexandra, Queen of Sweden, as learned as she is brave and generous; and too those most excellent ladies, the Duchess of Aveyro and The countess of Villaumbrosa.

The venerable Dr. Arce (worthy professor of Scripture, known for his virtue and learning), in his *For the Scholar of the Bible*, raises the question: “*Is it permissible for women to apply themselves to the study, and indeed the interpretation, of the Holy Bible?*” And in opposition he presents the verdicts passed by many saints, particularly the words of [Paul] the Apostle: “*Let women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted them to speak,*” etc. Arce then presents differing verdicts, including this passage addressed to Titus, again spoken by the Apostle: “*The aged women, in like manner, in holy attire [. . .] teaching well*”; and he gives other interpretations from the Fathers of the Church. Arce at last resolves, in his prudent way, that women are not allowed to lecture publically in the universities or to preach from the pulpits, but that studying, writing, and teaching privately is not only permitted but most beneficial and useful to them. Clearly, of course, he does not mean by this that all women should do so, but only those whom God may have seen fit to endow with special virtue and prudence, and who are very mature and erudite and possess the necessary talents and requirements for such a sacred occupation. And so just is this distinction that not only women, who are held to be so incompetent, but also men, who simply because they are men think themselves wise, are to be prohibited from the interpretation of the Sacred Word, save when they are most learned, virtuous, of amenable intellect and inclined to the good. For when the reverse is true, I believe, numerous sectarians are produced, and this has given rise to numerous heresies. For there are many who study only to become ignorant, especially those of arrogant, restless, and prideful spirits, fond of innovations in the Law (the very thing that rejects all innovation). And so they are not content until, for the sake of saying what no one before them has said, they speak heresy. Of such men as these the Holy Spirit says: “*For wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul.*” For them, more harm is worked by knowledge than by ignorance. A wit once observed that he who knows no Latin is not an utter fool, but he who does know it has met the prerequisites. And I might add that he is made a perfect fool (if foolishness can attain perfection) by having studied his bit of philosophy and theology and by knowing something of languages. For with that he can be foolish in several sciences and tongues; a great fool cannot be contained in his mother tongue alone.

To such men, I repeat, study does harm, because it is like putting a sword in the hands of a madman: though the sword be the noblest of instruments for defense, in his hands it becomes his own death and that of many others. This is what the Divine Letters became in the hands of that wicked Pelagius and of the perverse Arius, of that wicked Luther, and all the other heretics, like our own Dr. Cazalla (who was never either our own nor a doctor). Learning harmed them all, though it can be the best nourishment and life for the soul. For just as an infirm stomach, suffering from diminished heat, produces more bitter, putrid, and perverse humors the better the food that it is given, so too these evil persons give rise to worse opinions the more they study. Their understanding is obstructed by the very thing that should nourish it, and the fact is they study a great deal and digest very little, failing to measure their efforts to the narrow vessel of

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their understanding. In this regard the Apostle has said: “*For I say, by the grace that is given me, to all that are among you, not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety, and according as God hath divided to every one the measure of faith.*” And in truth the Apostle said this not to women but to men, and the “*Let [them] keep silence*” was meant not only for women, but for all those who are not very competent. If I wish to know as much as or more than Aristotle or St. Augustine, but I lack the ability of a St. Augustine or an Aristotle, then I may study more than both of them together, but I shall not only fail to reach my goal: I shall weaken and stupefy the workings of my feeble understanding with such a disproportionate aim.

Oh, that all men—and I, who am but an ignorant woman, first of all—might take the measure of our abilities before setting out to study and, what is worse, to write, in our jealous aspiration to equal and even surpass others. How little boldness would we summon, how many errors might we avoid, and how many distorted interpretations now noised abroad should be noised no further! And I place my own before all others, for if I knew all that I ought, I would not so much as write these words. Yet I protest that I do so only to obey you; and with such misgiving that you owe me more for taking up my pen with all this fear than you would owe me were I to present you with the most perfect works. But withal, it is well that this goes to meet with your correction: erase it, tear it up, and chastise me, for I shall value that more than all the vain applause others could give me. “*The just man shall correct me in mercy, and shall reprove me: but let not the oil of the sinner fatten my head.*”

And returning to our own Arce, I observe that in support of his views he presents these words of my father St. Jerome (in the letter *To Leta, on the Education of Her Daughter*), where he says: “*[Her] childish tongue must be imbued with the sweet music of the Psalms. [. . .] The very words from which she will get into the way of forming sentences should not be taken at haphazard but be definitely chosen and arranged on purpose. For example, let her have the names of the prophets and the apostles, and the whole list of patriarchs from Adam downwards, as Matthew and Luke give it. She will then be doing two things at the same time, and will remember them afterwards. [. . .] Let her every day repeat to you a portion of the Scriptures as her fixed task.*” Very well, if the Saint wished a little girl, scarcely beginning to speak, to be instructed thus, what must he desire for his nuns and spiritual daughters? We see this most clearly in the women already mentioned—Eustochium and Fabiola—and also in Marcella, the latter’s sister; in Pacatula, and in other women whom the Saint honors in his epistles, urging them on in this holy exercise. This appears in the letter already cited, where I noted the words “*let her repeat to you . . .*” which serve to reclaim and confirm St. Paul’s description, “teaching well.” For the “*let her repeat the task to you*” of my great Father makes clear that the little girl’s teacher must be Leta herself, the girl’s mother.

Oh, how many abuses would be avoided in our land if the older women were as well instructed as Leta and knew how to teach as is commanded by St. Paul and my father St. Jerome! Instead for lack of such learning and through the extreme feebleness in which they are determined to maintain our poor women, if any parents then wish to give their daughters more extensive Christian instruction than is usual, necessity and lack of learned older women oblige them to employ men as instructors to teach reading and writing, numbers and music, and other skills. This leads to considerable harm, with occurs every day in doleful instances of these

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unsuitable associations. For the immediacy of such contact and the passage of time all too frequently allow what seemed impossible to be accomplished quite easily. For this reason, many parents prefer to let their daughters remain uncivilized and untutored, rather than risk exposing them to such notorious peril as this familiarity with men. Yet all this could be avoided if there were old women of sound education, as St. Paul desires, so that instruction could be passed from the old to the young just as is done with sewing and all the customary skills.

For what impropriety can there be if an older woman, learned in letters and holy conversation and customs, should have in her charge the education of young maids? Better so than to let these young girls go to perdition, either for lack of any Christian teaching or because one tries to impart it through such dangerous means as male teachers. For if there were no greater risk than the simple indecency of seating a completely unknown man at the side of a bashful woman (who blushes if her own father should look her straight in the face), allowing him to address her with household familiarity and to speak to her with intimate authority, even so the modesty demanded in interchange with men and in conversation with them gives sufficient cause to forbid this. Indeed, I do not see how the custom of men as teachers of women can be without its dangers, save only in the strict tribunal of the confessional, or the distant teachings of the pulpit, or the remote wisdom of books; but never in the repeated handling that occurs in such immediate and tarnishing contact. And everyone knows this to be true. Nevertheless, it is permitted for no better reason than the lack of learned older women; therefore, it does great harm not to have them. This point should be taken into account by those who, tied to the "*Let women keep silence in the churches,*" curse the idea that women should acquire knowledge and teach, as if it were not the Apostle himself who described them "*teaching well.*" Furthermore, that prohibition applied to the case related by Eusebius: to wit, that in the early Church, women were set to teaching each other Christian doctrine in the temples. The murmur of their voices caused confusion when the apostles were preaching, and that is why they were told to be silent. Just so, we see today that when the preacher is preaching, no one prays aloud.

There can be no doubt that in order to understand many passages, one must know a great deal of the history, customs, rituals, proverbs, and even the habits of speech of the times in which they are written, in order to know what is indicated and what alluded to by certain sayings in divine letters. "*Rend your hearts, and not your garments*"—is that not an allusion to the Hebrews' ritual of tearing their clothing as a sign of grief, as was done by the evil high priest when he said that Christ had blasphemed? Do not many passages by the Apostle [Paul], on the aid and comfort of widows, refer to the customs of his times? Or that passage concerning the strong woman, "*Her husband is honorable in the gates,*" does it not allude to the custom of placing the judges' tribunals at the city gates? The saying "*Give land to God,*" does it not stand for making some vow? Was not the term *hiemantes* used for public sinners, because they made their penance out of doors, unlike others who did penance in a doorway? The complaint of Christ to the Pharisee who failed to greet Him with the kiss of peace or the washing of feet, is that not based on the Jewish custom of doing these things? And so it is with infinitely many more passages, not only in divine but in humane letters as well, which are met at every turn, like the phrase "*Honor the purple,*" which meant "Obey the king"; or the phrase *to put a hand to him,*" which meant "to emancipate," referring to the custom and ritual of giving a slave a slap to set him at liberty. Again, Virgil's "*The heavens thundered,*" alluding to the augury of thunder toward the west, which was thought a good omen. There is Martial's "*You never ate hare,*"

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which shows not only the wordplay of *leporem* (which means both “hare” and “jest”), but also a reference to a quality the hare was said to possess. There is the proverb, “*To sail the shores of Malia is to forget all the things of home,*” which refers to the great peril of the promontory of Laconia. The response of the chaste matron to an unwanted suitor, “*No doorframes shall be anointed on my account, nor shall the torches burn,*” to say that she would not marry, alludes to the ritual of anointing the doorways with oil and lighting nuptial torches at weddings; just so, we might say today, “On my account shall no dowry coins be spent, nor shall the priest give his blessing.” And in this vein, much commentary can be made on Virgil and Homer and all the poets and orators. Very well, and in addition to all this, what difficulties do we not find in sacred texts, even in matters of grammar—putting the plural in place of the singular, or moving from second to third person, like the passage in the Song of Songs: *Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth: for thy breasts are better than wine*? Or putting the adjectives in the genitive case, instead of the accusative, as in “*I will take the chalice of salvation*”? Or again, putting the feminine in place of the masculine; or, on the contrary, calling every sin adultery?

All this requires more study than is supposed by certain men who, as mere grammarians or, at most, armed with four terms from the principles of logic, wish to interpret the Scriptures and cling to the “*Let women keep silence in the churches,*” without knowing how to understand it rightly. So it is with another passage, “*Let the woman learn in silence*”; for this passage is more in favor of than against women, as it says that they *should* learn, and while they are learning, obviously, they must needs keep quiet. And it is also written, “*Hear, O Israel, and be silent,*” where the whole congregation of men and women are addressed, and all are told to be quiet, for whoever listens and learns has good reason to take heed and keep still. If this be not so, I would like these interpreters and expounders of St. Paul to explain to me how they understand the passage, “*Let women keep silence in the churches.*” For they must understand it either materially, to mean the pulpit and the lecture hall, or formally, to mean the community of all believers, which is to say the Church. If they understand it in the first sense (which is to my way of thinking its true sense, for we can see that indeed it is not permitted by the Church for women to read publicly or to preach), why then do they rebuke those women who study in private? And if they understand it in the second sense and wish to extend the Apostle’s prohibition to all instances without exception, so that not even in private may women write or study, then how is it that we see the Church has allowed a Gertrude, a Teresa, a Brigid, the nun of Agreda, and many other women to write? And if they tell me that these women all were saintly, true enough, but in no way hinders my argument. First, because St. Paul’s proposition is absolute and includes all women with no exception made for saints; for saintly, too, in their own day were Martha and Mary, and Marcella, and Mary the mother of Jacob, and Salome, and many other women who took part in the zeal of the early Church, yet Paul makes no exception for them. And in our own time we see that the Church permits writing by women saints and those who are not saints alike; for the nun of Agreda and María de la Antigua are not canonized, yet their writings go from hand to hand. Nor when Sts. Teresa and the others were writing, had they yet been canonized. Therefore, St. Paul’s prohibition applied only to public speech from the pulpit; for if the Apostle were to prohibit all writing, then the Church could not permit it. Very well now, I am not so bold as to teach, which would be most unsuitably presumptuous of me; and to write requires more talent than is mine and the greatest deliberation. So says St. Cyprian: *That which we write requires solemn deliberation.*” All that I have desired has been to study, so as to become less ignorant. For according to St. Augustine, some things are learned so as to act

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on them, and others simply for the sake of knowing them: “*We learn certain things in order to know them; others in order to do them.*” Then where is my transgression, if I refrain even from that which is permissible for women—to teach by writing—because I know myself to lack the abundant talent needed for it following Quintilian’s counsel: “*Let each one learn, not so much by the precepts of others, as by following the counsel of his own nature*”?

If my crime lies in the “Letter Worthy of Athena,” was that anything more than a simple report of my opinion, with all the indulgences granted me by our Holy Mother Church? For if She, with her most holy authority, does not forbid my writing, why must others forbid it? Is it bold of me to oppose Vieira, yet not so for that Reverend Father to oppose the three holy Fathers of the Church? Is my mind, such as it is, less free than his, though it derives from the same source? Is his opinion to be taken as one of the principles of the Holy Faith made manifest, that we must believe it blindly? Besides which, I have not in the slightest way fallen short of that respect owed such a great man, as his defender has done in this instance, forgetting the observation of Titus Lucius, “*Respect befits the arts.*” Nor did I so much as graze the hem of the blessed Society. Nor did I write for anyone other than the person who suggested it to me; and according to Pliny, “*The situation of one who publishes a thing is different from that of one who speaks it by name.*” For had I thought the letter was to be published, it would not have appeared as unkempt as it was. If it is heretical, as the critical says, why does he not denounce it? Thus he would find revenge and I contentment, for I more greatly value, as I ought, the name of Catholic and obedient daughter of my Holy Mother Church than any praise that might befall me as a scholar. If the letter be crude—as he rightly says it is—then let him laugh at it, though he laugh falsely with what they call rabbit’s laughter. I do not say that he should praise me, for just as I was free to disagree with Vieira and person shall be free to disagree with my judgment.