

## SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

1648 – 1695

During the latter decades of the seventeenth century, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a Hieronymite nun based in Mexico City, was among the best-known writers in the Spanish-speaking world. Her poetry and plays, on themes ranging from the religious to the secular, were read and performed at the courts in both New Spain and Madrid. Though her status as a woman writer certainly invoked criticism from conservative religious leaders, for much of her career her work was overwhelmingly well-received, and Sor Juana herself was praised as the “Tenth Muse of America.”



Juana Inés Ramírez was born in the village of San Miguel Nepantla in 1648, the daughter of unmarried parents; baptised as a “daughter of the Church,” she went by her mother’s surname and was brought up by her mother and various wealthier maternal relatives. Extremely precocious as a child, Juana claimed in her autobiographical writings to have learned to read and write at the age of three. Different historical sources conflict as to the order of events, but it is clear that as a child she read voraciously from her grandfather’s substantial library, that she mastered Latin at a young age, and that around the age of eight or ten she was sent to the viceregal court in Mexico City, where she astonished the high society with her wit, intellectual avidity, and vivacious personality, and where she wrote her first poems. It was during this period that she was introduced to the New Spanish vicereine, Leonor Carreto, and later to her successor, María Luisa Manrique de Lara Y Gonzaga—both of whom would become important patrons of Juana’s writing. Sor Juana, who wrote love poetry with both male and female subjects, dedicated several passionate lyrics to María Luisa.

Given her apparently rich life at court—and lack of any particularly strong religious inclination—Juana’s choice to enter the monastic life may seem puzzling. It is worth noting, however, that the Catholic convents of New Spain were a common refuge for young women who were either unwilling or unable to marry. In 1667 Juana entered the Discalced Carmelite order as a novice, but found the lifestyle there far too austere, and left after only three months. Two years later, however, she joined the Convent of Santa Paula (later San Jerónimo), which was known for its comparative leniency in the enforcement of rules. Here she lived for the remaining twenty-six years of her life, taking on the name Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz (of the Cross).

Though officially cloistered from the outside, secular world, in reality the convent allowed its members a large degree of connectedness to the Mexican metropolis, as well as a greater amount of independence than would have been available to them as either married or unmarried laywomen. The nuns were accorded private cells, often consisting of several rooms, were allowed to acquire personal possessions such as jewelry and books, and were often given paid work; Sor Juana, for instance, was employed as the convent’s accounts keeper. Though they were expected to adhere to a regular schedule of prayer and to participate in some communal meals and needlework sessions, they were also permitted to spend much of their time alone, and to receive visitors in the convent’s outer parlor. Many of the sisters had personal servants, and Sor Juana herself owned at least one enslaved maidservant during her time at the convent. During her apparently ample personal time, Sor Juana studied the sciences, mathematics, philosophy, architecture, music theory, theology, and literature, over the years amassing one of the largest private libraries in the colonial Americas. Perhaps most significantly, she kept up a vibrant correspondence with the outside world, including with several New Spanish viceroys, who corresponded with her both from New Spain and from the court at Madrid.

Throughout the 1680s, Sor Juana took advantage of her close personal connection to New Spain's colonial nobility, and her literary writings became highly sought after at the Mexican court. Her writings included plays, various forms of secular and religious song to be performed at courtly ceremonies and religious services, odes in honor of important personages or public occasions, and lyric poems—many of them dealing with romantic themes. Her work reflects mastery of a Baroque Mexican literary aesthetic, which includes highly ornate, often exaggerative language, intricate metaphors, and copious references to classical literature and philosophy; some of her villancicos (poetic compositions sung during religious services) also incorporate the Indigenous Nahuatl language. Though her works show the influence of eminent Spanish Baroque poets such as Luis de Góngora, poems such as her epic *First Dream* (first published 1692) have also been likened by recent scholars to the works of much-later symbolist poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé and modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot; *First Dream*, a mythologically inspired, gender-fluid depiction of a soul's pursuit of intellectual knowledge, has also been extensively analyzed for its resonances with later feminist thought.

Little evidence has survived to indicate a first date of composition for many of Sor Juana's works. A first volume of her poetry was published in Spain in 1689 as *The Overflowing of the Castalian Spring, by the Tenth Muse of America* (the "Castalian Spring" refers to a fountain in Greek mythology said to inspire poetic genius). Two more volumes would follow, with the *Second Volume of Her Works* published in Seville in 1692 and *Fame and Posthumous Works of the Mexican Phoenix* in Madrid in 1700. Sor Juana's name became mired in controversy near the end of 1690, when her tract criticizing a sermon by venerated Portuguese Jesuit António Vieira was published without her consent. The document raised the ire of a number of religious authority figures, who began to pressure her to desist from her literary and intellectual interests. It is unclear whether Sor Juana continued to write after 1691; she fell into relative obscurity until her death during an epidemic in 1695.

Over the following two centuries, Sor Juana was largely ignored by scholars and readers; no volumes of her poetry were re-issued between 1725 and 1940. Interest in her oeuvre was reignited in the mid-twentieth century, especially after the publication of Mexican poet Octavio Paz's influential biography *Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith* in 1982. Since then, her poetry has been extensively studied by both Mexican and international scholars, and Sor Juana has become regarded once again as one of the most important figures of seventeenth-century colonial literature.

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NOTE ON THE TEXTS: The English-language texts presented below are based upon those appearing in Alan S. Trueblood's edition, *A Sor Juana Anthology* (1988), whose translations are in turn based on the Spanish versions appearing in *Obras selectas* (Georgina Sabat de Rivers and Elias L. Rivers, 1976) and *Obras completas* (Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, 1952 and 1955). Trueblood's in-line biblical citations (in the *Reply to Sor Philothea*) have not been retained, although biblical references are noted in footnotes where relevant, in accordance with the practices of this anthology; Trueblood's in-line translations of Latin material quoted by Sor Juana have been moved to the footnotes. The Spanish-language poem presented here is based on the version first published in *Inundacion Castalida de la Unica Poetisa, Musa Dezima, Soror Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1689). The spelling and punctuation of the Spanish have not been modernized.



*Expressa su respecto amoroso, y dize el sentido en que llama suya, à la Señora Virreyna.*

Divina Lysi mía:  
 perdona, si me atrevo,  
 à llamarte assi, quando  
 aun, de ser tuya, el nombre no merezco.  
 5 A èsto, no osadia  
 es llamarte assi; puesto,  
 que à ti te sobran rayos,  
 si en mi pudiera aver atrevimientos.  
 Error es de la lengua;  
 10 que lo que dize Imperio  
 del dueño, en el dominio,  
 parezcan possessiones, en el siervo.  
 Mi Rey, dize el Vassallo,  
 mi Carcel, dize el preso,  
 15 y el mas humilde Esclavo,  
 sin agraviarlo, llama suyo, al dueño.  
 Assi, quando yo mia,  
 te llamo, no pretendo,  
 que juzguen, que eres mia,  
 20 sino solo, que yo ser tuya, quiero.  
 Yo te vi; pero basta,  
 que à publicar incendios,  
 basta apuntar la causa;  
 sin añadir la culpa del efecto.  
 25 Que mirarte tan alta,  
 no impide à mi denuedo;  
 que no ay Deidad segura  
 al altivo volar del pensamiento.  
 Y aunque otras más merezcan;  
 30 en distancia del Cielo,  
 lo mismo dista el valle  
 mas humilde, que el monte más sobervio.  
 En fin yo de adorarte  
 el delito confieso;  
 35 si quieres castigarme,  
 esse mismo castigo serà premio.  
 —1689

*She expresses her loving respect, explaining what she means when she says Her Ladyship the Vicereine, Marquise de la Laguna, belongs to her<sup>1</sup>*

My divine Lysis:  
 Mdo forgive my darling,  
 if so I address you,  
 unworthy though I am to be known as yours.  
 5 I cannot think it bold  
 to call you so, well knowing  
 you've ample thunderbolts  
 to shatter any overweening<sup>2</sup> of mine.  
 It's the tongue that misspeaks  
 10 when what is called dominion—  
 I mean, the master's rule—  
 is made to seem possession by the slave.  
 The vassal says: my king;  
 my prison, the convict says;  
 15 and any humble slave  
 will call the master his without offense.  
 Thus, when I call you mine,  
 it's not that I expect  
 you'll be considered such—  
 20 only that I hope I may be yours.  
 I saw you—need more be said?  
 To broadcast a fire,  
 telling the cause suffices—  
 no need to apportion blame for the effect.  
 25 Seeing you so exalted  
 does not prevent my daring;  
 no god is ever secure  
 against the lofty flight of human thought.  
 There are women more deserving,  
 30 yet in distance from heaven  
 the humblest of valleys  
 seems no farther than the highest peak.  
 In sum, I must admit  
 to the crime of adoring you;  
 35 should you wish to punish me,  
 the very punishment will be reward.  
 —1988

<sup>1</sup> *She expresses ... to her* These headings were included in the first editions of Sor Juana's collected works; scholars are unsure as to who wrote them.

<sup>2</sup> *overweening* Presumptuousness.

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*She demonstrates the inconsistency of men's wishes in blaming women for what they themselves have caused*

Silly, you men—so very adept  
 at wrongly faulting womankind,  
 not seeing you're alone to blame  
 for faults you plant in woman's mind.

5 After you've won by urgent plea  
 the right to tarnish her good name,  
 you will expect her to behave—  
*you*, that coaxed her into shame.

You batter her resistance down  
 10 and then, all righteousness, proclaim  
 that feminine frivolity,  
 not your persistence, is to blame.

When it comes to bravely posturing,  
 your witlessness must take the prize:  
 15 you're the child that makes a bogeyman,  
 and then recoils in fear and cries.

Presumptuous beyond belief,  
 you'd have the woman you pursue  
 be Thais<sup>1</sup> when you're courting her,  
 20 Lucretia<sup>2</sup> once she falls to you.

For plain default of common sense,  
 could any action be so queer  
 as oneself to cloud the mirror,  
 then complain that it's not clear?

25 Whether you're favored or disdained,  
 nothing can leave you satisfied.  
 You whimper if you're turned away,  
 you sneer if you've been gratified.

With you, no woman can hope to score;  
 30 whichever way, she's bound to lose;  
 spurning you, she's ungrateful;  
 succumbing, you call her lewd.

Your folly is always the same:  
 you apply a single rule

<sup>1</sup> *Thais* Ancient Greek courtesan (c. 4th century BCE) who followed the troops of Alexander the Great during his conquests. She was known as a lover of one of Alexander's generals and possibly of Alexander himself.

<sup>2</sup> *Lucretia* Ancient Roman noblewoman (c. 6th century BCE) who is said to have been raped by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the last king of Rome, and to have subsequently died by suicide.

35 to the one you accuse of looseness  
 and the one you brand as cruel.

What happy mean could there be  
 for the woman who catches your eye,  
 if, unresponsive, she offends  
 40 yet whose complaisance you decry?

Still, whether it's torment or anger—  
 and both ways you've yourselves to blame—  
 God bless the woman who won't have you,  
 no matter how loud you complain.

45 It's your persistent entreaties  
 that change her from timid to bold.  
 Having made her thereby naughty,  
 you would have her good as gold.

So where does the greater guilt lie  
 50 for a passion that should not be:  
 with the man who pleads out of baseness  
 or the woman debased by his plea?

Or which is more to be blamed—  
 though both will have cause for chagrin:  
 55 the woman who sins for money  
 or the man who pays money to sin?

So why are you men all so stunned  
 at the thought you're all guilty alike?  
 Either like them for what you've made them  
 60 or make of them what you can like.

If you'd give up pursuing them,  
 you'd discover, without a doubt,  
 you've a stronger case to make  
 against those who seek you out.

65 I well know what powerful arms  
 you wield in pressing for evil:  
 your arrogance is allied  
 with the world, the flesh, and the devil!  
 —1689 (TRANSLATION 1988)

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*Which contains a fantasy satisfied with a love befitting it*

Se  
mblance of my elusive love, hold still—  
image of a bewitchment fondly cherished,  
lovely fiction that robs my heart of joy,  
fair mirage that makes it joy to perish.

5 Since already my breast, like willing iron,  
yields to the powerful magnet of your charms,  
why must you so flatteringly allure me,  
then slip away and cheat my eager arms?

10 Even so, you shan't boast, self-satisfied,  
that your tyranny has triumphed over me,  
evade as you will arms opening wide,

all but encircling your phantasmal<sup>1</sup> form:  
in vain shall you elude my fruitless clasp,  
for fantasy holds you captive in its grasp.  
—1692 (TRANSLATION 1988)

from the *Reply to Sor Philothea*

In November 1690, Sor Juana wrote a letter addressed to her friend and confessor, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, Bishop of Tlaxcala, offering her commentary on a sermon given in the mid-seventeenth century by venerated Portuguese Jesuit António Vieira. Sor Juana disagreed with Vieira on his interpretation of John 13, a chapter of the New Testament in which Christ washes the feet of his disciples and then gives them a new commandment: “That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.” Her letter became controversial—less so because of the unorthodoxy of her argument than because of her boldness in daring to question the theological arguments of a male religious superior.

Juana's letter appeared in print in Puebla at the end of November, published without her consent by someone identifying as “Sor Philothea”—in reality, Sor Juana's confessor Fernández. In a prefatory “admonishment,”<sup>2</sup> Philothea expresses admiration for Juana's intelligence, but nonetheless censures

what she presents as Juana's impious and unfeminine willingness to opine on both religious and secular subjects. A few months later, Juana published her own reply to Philothea, excerpted here, in which she vigorously defends her right as a woman to pursue both worldly and spiritual knowledge.

My most illustrious Lady: ...

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oming down to particulars, I confess to you, with the ingenuousness<sup>3</sup> owed to you and the truth and clarity natural and habitual with me, that my not having written much on sacred subjects is not from disinclination or lack of application, but from an excess of the awe and reverence due those Sacred Letters, for the understanding of which I acknowledge myself so ill-equipped and which I am so unworthy to treat. There ever resounds in my ears, with no little dread, our Lord's threat and interdiction to sinners like me: *Quare tu enarras iustitias meas, et assumis testamentum meum per os tuum?*<sup>4</sup> This question and the awareness that even to learned men the reading of the Canticle of Canticles<sup>5</sup> was forbidden until they were over thirty, and that of Genesis as well, the latter on account of its obscurity, the former lest the appeal of those epithalamiums<sup>6</sup> give imprudent youth cause to apply their sense to carnal affections. My great father Saint Jerome confirms this, requiring that the former be the last thing studied, for the same reason, *At ultimum sine periculo discat Canticum Canticorum, ne si in exordio legerit, sub carnalibus verbis spiritualium Nuptiarum Epithalamium non intelligens, vulneretur.*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *ingenuousness* Openness; sincerity.

<sup>4</sup> *Quare tu ... os tuum?* God's words to the wicked in Psalm 50.16, quoted here from the Latin Vulgate: “What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth?”

<sup>5</sup> *the Canticle of Canticles* Book of the Old Testament better known as the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs. A poetic celebration of romantic and erotic love, it is notable for being the only book of the Old Testament that gives virtually no explicit attention to religious matters—though some Christian and Jewish scholars read it as an allegory of Christ's or God's love for humanity.

<sup>6</sup> *epithalamiums* Marriage songs.

<sup>7</sup> *At ultimum ... vulneretur* Latin: “But last of all, let her, without risk, study the Canticle of Canticles; lest she suffer harm by reading it at the outset without grasping the epithalamium of

<sup>1</sup> *phantasmal* Imaginary or immaterial

<sup>2</sup> See the website component of this anthology for selections from the admonishment.

And Seneca says: *Teneris in annis haut clara est fides*.<sup>1</sup> Then how should I dare to take this into my unworthy hands, when my sex, age, and especially my way of life all oppose it? And so I confess that many times this fear has taken the pen from my hand and caused the subject to sink back into the very mind from which it sought to emerge.

I encountered no such problem in secular subjects, since heresy against art is punished, not by the Holy Office, but by the laughter of the intelligent and the censure of the critical. The censure, *iusta vel iniusta, timenda non est*,<sup>2</sup> for it does not interfere with communion and attending mass, whence it concerns me little or not at all. For, in the opinion of the very people who slander me for writing, I am under no obligation to be learned nor do I possess the capacity never to err. Therefore my failure involves neither fault nor discredit: no fault since there is no chance of my not erring and *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur*.<sup>3</sup> And in truth I have never written except when pressured and forced to and then only to please others and even then not only without enjoyment but with actual repugnance because I have never thought of myself as possessing the intelligence and educational background required of a writer. Hence my usual reply to those who urge me on, especially where sacred matters are involved: what aptitude have I, what preparation, what subjects, what familiarity do I possess for such a task, beyond a handful of superficial sophistries?<sup>4</sup> Let such things be

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spiritual marriage beneath the carnal words" (Trueblood). The quotation is from the *Epistle to Laeta*, a letter from Saint Jerome to one of his female followers, who had sought his advice on how to raise her daughter in Rome as a virgin consecrated to Christ. The Hieronymite Order, of which Sor Juana was a member, is modeled after the life of Saint Jerome.

<sup>1</sup> *Teneris in ... est fides* Latin: "Faith is not clearly defined in youth" (Trueblood). The quotation is from the tragedy *Octavia*, often attributed to the Roman philosopher and playwright Seneca the Younger.

<sup>2</sup> *iusta vel ... non est* Latin: "whether deserved or not, is not to be feared" (Trueblood). This may play on a commonly quoted Latin statement that translates to "the judgment of a pastor, whether deserved or not, is to be feared." See Pope Gregory I, *Homilia in Evangelia* (591–92).

<sup>3</sup> *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur* Latin: "no one is obliged to attempt the impossible" (Trueblood)—a maxim capturing a principle in ancient Roman law.

<sup>4</sup> *sophistries* Convincing but fallacious or shallow arguments.

left to those who understand them; I want no trouble with the Holy Office. I am ignorant and I shudder to think that I might utter some disreputable proposition or distort the proper understanding of some passage or other. My purpose in studying is not to write, much less to teach (this would be overbearing pride in my case), but simply to see whether studying makes me less ignorant. This is my reply and these are my feelings.

I have never written of my own accord, but only when pressured by others. I could truthfully say to them: *Vos me coegistis*.<sup>5</sup> What is true and I will not deny (first because it is public knowledge and then—even if this counts against me—because God, in His goodness, has favored me with a great love of the truth) is that from my first glimmers of reason, my inclination to letters was of such power and vehemence, that neither the reprimands of others—and I have received many—nor my own considerations—and there have been not a few of these—have succeeded in making me abandon this natural impulse which God has implanted in me—only His Majesty knows why and wherefore and His Majesty also knows that I have prayed to Him to extinguish the light of my mind, only leaving sufficient to keep His Law, since any more is overmuch, so some say, in a woman, and there are even those who say it is harmful. His Majesty also knows that, not succeeding in this, I have tried to inter<sup>6</sup> my name along with my mind and sacrifice it to Him alone who gave it to me; and that this was precisely my motivation in taking the veil, even though the exercises and shared life which a community entails were repellent to the independence and tranquillity which my inclination to study needed. And once in the community, the Lord God knows and, in the world, he knows who alone had the right to know it, how hard I tried to conceal my name, and that he did not allow this, saying that it was temptation, which no doubt it was.<sup>7</sup> If I could repay you some part of what I owe you, my Lady, I think I would be paying you simply by relating this, for it has never escaped

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<sup>5</sup> *Vos me coegistis* Latin: "You have compelled me" (Trueblood). See 2 Corinthians 12.11: "I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing."

<sup>6</sup> *inter* Bury.

<sup>7</sup> [Translator's note] A probable allusion to her confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda, S.J.



my lips before, except when addressed to one who had the right to know it. But I want you to know that, in throwing wide open to you the gates of my heart, exposing to your gaze its most tightly guarded secrets, my justification for the liberty I am taking is the great debt I owe to your venerable person and overly generous favors.

To go on with the account of this strong bent of mine, about which I want you to be fully informed, let me say that when I was not yet three, my mother sent a sister of mine, older than I, to learn to read in one of those establishments called *Amigas*,<sup>1</sup> at which point affection and mischievousness on my part led me to follow her. Seeing that she was being given lessons, I became so inflamed with the desire to learn to read, that I tricked the mistress—or so I thought—by telling her that my mother had directed her to give me lessons. This was not believable and she did not believe me, but falling in with my little trick, she did give me lessons. I continued attending and she went on teaching me, no longer as a joke, since the event opened her eyes. I learned to read in so short a time that I already knew how when my mother found out, for the mistress kept it from her in order to give her a pleasant surprise and receive her recompense all at one time. I kept still, since I thought I would be whipped for having acted on my own initiative. The person who taught me is still alive (may God preserve her) and can attest to this.

I remember that at this period, though I loved to eat, as children do at that age, I refrained from eating cheese, because someone had told me it made you stupid, and my urge to learn was stronger than my wish to eat, powerful as this is in children. Afterward, when I was six or seven and already knew how to read and write, along with all the sewing skills and needlework that women learn, I discovered that in the City of Mexico there was a university with schools where the different branches of learning could be studied, and as soon as I learned this I began to deluge my mother with urgent and insistent pleas to change my manner of dress and send me to stay with relatives in the City of Mexico so that I might study and take courses at the university. She refused, and rightly so; nevertheless, I found a way to read many different books my grandfather owned, notwithstanding the punishments and

reproofs this entailed, so that when I went to the City of Mexico people were astonished, not so much at my intelligence as at the memory and store of knowledge I had at an age at which it would seem I scarcely had time to learn to speak.

I began to study Latin, in which I do not believe I had twenty lessons in all, and I was so intensely studious that despite the natural concern of women—especially in the flower of their youth—with dressing their hair, I used to cut four or five fingers' width from mine, keeping track of how far it had formerly reached, and making it my rule that if by the time it grew back to that point, I did not know such-and-such a thing which I had set out to learn as it grew, I would cut it again as a penalty for my dullness. Thus it would happen that it would grow back and I still would not know what I had set myself to learn, because my hair grew rapidly, whereas I was a slow learner, and I did indeed cut it as a punishment for my slowness, for I did not consider it right that a head so bare of knowledge should be dressed with hair, knowledge being the more desirable ornament. I became a nun because, although I knew that the way of life involved much that was repellent to my nature—I refer to its incidental, not its central aspects—nevertheless, given my total disinclination to marriage, it was the least unreasonable and most becoming choice I could make to assure my ardently desired salvation. To which first consideration, as most important, all the other small frivolities of my nature yielded and gave way, such as my wish to live alone, to have no fixed occupation which might curtail my freedom to study, nor the noise of a community to interfere with the tranquil stillness of my books. This made me hesitate a little before making up my mind, until, enlightened by learned persons that hesitation was temptation, I overcame it by the grace of God and entered upon the life I now pursue so unworthily. I thought I was escaping from myself, but, alas for me, I had brought myself along. In this propensity I brought my greatest enemy, given me by Heaven whether as a boon or a punishment I cannot decide, for, far from dying out or being hindered by all the exercises religion entails, it exploded like gunpowder. *Privatio est causa appetitus*<sup>2</sup> had its confirmation in me.

<sup>1</sup> *Amigas* Latin: “girls’ elementary schools” (Trueblood).

<sup>2</sup> *Privatio est causa appetitus* Latin: “Privation arouses the appetite” (Trueblood).

I went back (I misspeak: I had never stopped); I went on with the studious pursuit (in which I found relaxation during all the free time remaining from my obligations) of reading and more reading, study and more study, with no other teacher than books themselves. One can readily imagine how hard it is to study from those lifeless letters, lacking a teacher's live voice and explanations. Still I happily put up with all those drawbacks, for the sheer love of learning. Oh, if it had only been for the love of God, which would have been the sound way, what merit would have been mine! I *will* say that I tried to uplift my study as much as I could and direct it to serving Him, since the goal I aspired to was the study of theology, it seeming to me a mean sort of ineptitude for a Catholic not to know all that can be found out in this life through natural means concerning divine mysteries. I also felt that being a nun and not a lay person, I should, because of my ecclesiastical status, make a profession of letters—and furthermore that, as a daughter of Saint Jerome and Saint Paula,<sup>1</sup> it would be a great disservice for the daughter of such learned parents to be a fool. This is what I took upon myself, and it seemed right to do so, unless of course—and this is probably the case—it was simply a way of flattering and applauding my own natural tendency, proposing its own pleasure to it as an obligation.

In this way I went on, continually directing the course of my study, as I have said, toward the eminence of sacred theology. To reach this goal, I considered it necessary to ascend the steps of human arts and sciences, for how can one who has not mastered the style of the ancillary<sup>2</sup> branches of learning hope to understand that of the queen of them all? How, lacking logic, was I to understand the general and specific methodologies of which Holy Scripture is composed? How, without rhetoric, could I understand its figures, tropes, and locutions? How, without physics, all the natural questions concerning the nature of sacrificial animals, which symbolize so many things already explicated, and so many others? How, whether Saul's

being cured by the sound of David's harp<sup>3</sup> came about by virtue of the natural power of music, or through supernatural powers which God was pleased to bestow on David? How, lacking arithmetic, could one understand such mysterious computations of years, days, months, hours, weeks, as those of Daniel<sup>4</sup> and others, for the intelligence of which one needs to know the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers? How, without geometry, could one measure the sacred ark of the covenant<sup>5</sup> and the holy city of Jerusalem, whose mysterious measurements form a cube in all its dimensions, and the marvelous proportional distribution of all its parts?<sup>6</sup> How, without a knowledge of architecture, is one to understand Solomon's great temple,<sup>7</sup> of which God Himself was the artificer who provided the arrangement and layout, the wise king being only the overseer who carried it out? In it, no column's base was without its mystery, no column without its symbolic sense, no cornice without allusiveness, no architrave without meaning, and so on with all its parts, not even the most miniscule fillet serving solely as support or complement to the design of the whole, but rather itself symbolizing greater things. How will one understand the historical books without a full knowledge of the principles and divisions of which history consists? Those recapitulations in the narrative which postpone what actually occurred first? How will

<sup>3</sup> *Saul's being . . . David's harp* See 1 Samuel 16.23: "And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him." Saul, the first king of a united Israel, was succeeded to the throne by his son-in-law David, a talented musician.

<sup>4</sup> *Daniel* Biblical prophet. The Book of Daniel includes numerous highly specific prophecies in which the durations of events are sometimes given in exact numbers of days.

<sup>5</sup> *ark of the covenant* Gold-plated chest said to house the stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments are written. Its exact dimensions are specified in Genesis 6.15.

<sup>6</sup> *the holy city . . . its parts* Revelation 21 provides a detailed description of the holy city of New Jerusalem, which includes its measurements: "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal" (Revelation 21.16).

<sup>7</sup> *Solomon's great temple* Holy Temple in ancient Jerusalem said to have been constructed by Solomon, king of Israel. The temple's measurements and features are outlined in 2 Chronicles 3–4.

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Paula* Follower of Saint Jerome, who joined Jerome in Bethlehem with her two daughters and established the Hieronymite convent to which Sor Juana's convent traced its origins (347–404).

<sup>2</sup> *ancillary* Subserving; supporting.



one understand the legal books without a complete acquaintance with both codes of law? How, without a great deal of erudition, all the matters of secular history mentioned in Holy Writ, all the customs of the Gentiles, the rites of the ways of speaking? How, without many rules and much reading of the Church Fathers, will one be able to understand the prophets' obscure forms of expression? And how, unless one is thoroughly versed in music, will one understand those musical proportions, with all their fine points, found in so many passages, especially in Abraham's petitions to God for the cities, asking whether He would forgive them, providing there were fifty righteous men, from which number he went down to forty-five, which is the *sesquinone* and is as from *mi* to *re*: thence to forty, which is the *sesquioctave* and as from *re* to *mi*; thence to thirty, which is the *sesquiterce*, or the proportion of the *Diatessaron*; thence to twenty, which is the *sesquialter*, or that of the *diapente*; thence to ten, which is the *duple*, or *diapason*—and went no further, there being no other harmonic proportions.<sup>1</sup> Now, how is this to be understood without music? ...

... I confess that I am far removed from wisdom's confines and that I have wished to pursue it, though *a longe*.<sup>2</sup> But the sole result has been to draw me closer to the flames of persecution, the crucible of torture, and this has even gone so far as a formal request that study be forbidden me.

This was successful in one instance involving a very holy and very ingenuous prelate who thought studying was something for the Inquisition<sup>3</sup> and ordered me to cease. I obeyed her (for the three months her right to

<sup>1</sup> *Abraham's petitions ... harmonic proportions* In Genesis 18, God declares he will destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants have been sinful. Abraham petitions God to save the righteous inhabitants, asking, "Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?"; when God agrees, Abraham gradually lowers the number of righteous inhabitants as Sor Juana describes. Sor Juana applies Pythagorean musical theory, popularized by Italian music theorist Pietro Cerone (1566–1625), to her interpretation of the narrative.

<sup>2</sup> *a longe* Latin: from afar.

<sup>3</sup> *something for the Inquisition* I.e., a matter of concern to be brought up before the Inquisition—a group of institutions, established by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and greatly expanded by the seventeenth century, designed to combat various kinds of heresy.

so order me lasted) as regarded not taking a book in hand, but as to ceasing study altogether, it not being in my power, I could not carry it out. For, although I did not study from books, I did from everything God has created, all of it being my letters, and all this universal chain of being my book. I saw nothing without reflecting on it; I heard nothing without wondering at it—not even the tiniest, most material thing. For, as there is no created thing, no matter how lowly, in which one cannot recognize the *me fecit Deus*,<sup>4</sup> there is none that does not confound the mind once it stops to consider it. Thus, I repeat, I looked and marveled at all of them, so much so that simply from the person with whom I spoke, and from what that person said to me, countless reflections arose in my mind. What could be the origin of so great a variety of characters and minds, when all belonged to one species? Which humors and hidden qualities could bring this about? If I saw a figure, I at once fell to working out the relationship of its lines, measuring it with my mind and recasting it along different ones. Sometimes I would walk back and forth across the front of a sleeping-room of ours—a very large one—and observe how, though the lines of its two sides were parallel and its ceiling horizontal, one's vision made it appear as if the lines inclined toward each other and the ceiling were lower at the far end, from which I inferred that visual lines run straight but not parallel, tending rather toward a pyramidal figure. And I asked myself whether this could be the reason the ancients questioned whether the world was spherical or not. Because, although it appears to be, this could be an optical illusion, and show concavities where there might in fact be none.

This type of observation would occur to me about everything and still does, without my having any say in the matter; indeed, it continually irritates me because it tires my mind. I thought the same thing occurred in everyone's case, and with writing verse as well, until experience proved me wrong. This turn, or habit, of mind is so strong that I can look upon nothing without reflecting on it. Two little girls were playing with a top in my presence. The moment I saw its movement and form, I began, in my crazy way, to consider the easy motion of the spherical form, and how, the impulse once given, it continued independently of its

<sup>4</sup> *me fecit Deus* Latin: "God made me" (Trueblood).

cause, since at a distance from the girl's hand, which originated the motion, the top went on dancing. Nor was this enough for me. I had flour brought and sifted, so as to tell, when the top danced over it, whether the circles its motion described were perfect or not. I discovered that they were simply spirals which moved farther and farther from the circular in proportion as the impulse wore down. Other girls were playing with pins—childhood's most frivolous game. I would approach and observe the shapes the pins took, and on noticing that three chanced to form a triangle, I would set about actually connecting them, recalling that this was the shape the mysterious ring of Solomon was said to have taken—that ring on which there were distant glimmerings and depictions of the Most Holy Trinity,<sup>1</sup> by virtue of which it worked such prodigious and marvelous things. This was also said to be the shape of David's harp, for which reason Saul was said to have been cured by its sound. The harps of our day have retained the same shape.

What could I not tell you, my Lady, of the secrets of Nature which I have discovered in cooking! That an egg hangs together and fries in fat or oil, and that, on the contrary, it disintegrates in syrup. That, to keep sugar liquid, it suffices to add the tiniest part of water in which a quince or some other tart fruit has been. That the yolk and white of the same egg are so different in nature, that when eggs are used with sugar, the yolks must be used separately from the whites, never together with them. I do not wish to tire you with such trivia, which I relate only to give you a full picture of my native turn of mind, which will, no doubt, make you laugh. But, Madam, what is there for us women to know, if not bits of kitchen philosophy? As Lupercio Leonardo said: One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper.<sup>2</sup> And I am always saying, when I observe these small details: If Aristotle<sup>3</sup> had been a cook, he would have written much more.

<sup>1</sup> *mysterious ring . . . Most Holy Trinity* Likely a reference to the Seal of Solomon, a signet ring said to have been possessed by King Solomon, and to have given him the power to command spirits and communicate with animals; the seal is often depicted in the shape of a six-pointed star.

<sup>2</sup> [Translator's note] The Aragonese poet Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola (1562–1631), not his brother Lupercio, is the source of the saying ("First Satire," lines 143–44).

<sup>3</sup> *Aristotle* Greek philosopher (384–322 BCE).

But to continue with the workings of my mind, let me say that this line of thought is so constant with me that I have no need of books. On one occasion, when, owing to some serious stomach trouble, the doctor forbade my studying, I obeyed for several days, but then I pointed out that allowing me books would be much less harmful, since my mental activity was so vigorous, so vehement, that it used up more spirits in a quarter of an hour than studying from books did in four days. So they agreed reluctantly to allow me to read. And not only that, my Lady: even my sleep was not free from this constant activity of my brain. In fact, it seems to go on during sleep with all the more freedom and lack of restraint, putting together the separate images it has carried over from waking hours with greater clarity and tranquility, debating with itself, composing verses, of which I could draw up a whole catalogue for you, including certain thoughts and subtleties I have arrived at more easily while asleep than while awake, which I won't go into, not wishing to bore you. What has been said suffices for your own acumen and high-mindedness to grasp with clarity and full understanding my native disposition of mind and the origin, methods, and present state of my studies.

Even if these studies were to be viewed, my Lady, as to one's credit (as I see they are indeed celebrated in men), none would be due me, since I pursue them involuntarily. If they are seen as reprehensible, for the same reason I do not think I should be blamed. Still, though, I am so unsure of myself, that neither in this nor in anything do I trust my own judgment. Hence I leave the decision up to your supreme talent, and will abide by whatever it decrees, with no antagonism and no reluctance, for this has been nothing more than a simple account of my inclination to letters. . . .

—1691 (TRANSLATION 1988)