

Answer by the poet to the most illustrious Sister Filotea de la Cruz<sup>1</sup>  
by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1691)

Very Exalted Madam, my Lady:

(1) I have not delayed my answer<sup>2</sup> for so many days due to my will, my poor health, and my justified fear. Is it any wonder that at my first step my clumsy pen encountered and tripped on two obstacles? The first—and for me the hardest—is knowing how to answer your totally learned, very prudent, extremely holy, and immensely loving letter. And if I, seeing how, when the Angelic Scholastic Doctor, St. Thomas,<sup>3</sup> was asked about his silence concerning his master Albertus Magnus,<sup>4</sup> the pupil answered that he kept quiet because he was unable to say anything worthy of Albertus, then how much reasonable is it for me to be quiet, not like the Saint out of modesty, but actually because I know nothing worthwhile for you to hear. The second obstacle is to know how to thank you for the excessive yet unexpected favor you did me in sending my rough papers to the printers. It is a favor so beyond measure that it far exceeds the most ambitious hopes and the most fantastic desires, and, as a rational being my mind cannot even grasp it. In short, your favor is of such a magnitude that not only can it not be confined within the limits of speech, but it even exceeds all my capacity for gratitude, on the one hand, because it was so huge and, on the other hand, because it was so unexpected. As Quintilian said: *Minorem spei, maiorem benefacti gloriam pereunt.*<sup>5</sup> And to such a degree that they silence the recipient of them.

(2) When the Baptist's mother,<sup>6</sup> who was happily barren before becoming miraculously fertile, welcomed to her house such an overwhelming a guest as the Mother of the Word, her understanding was confused and speech failed her. Hence, instead of thanks she burst out with doubts and questions: *Et unde hoc mihi?*<sup>7</sup> From where does such a thing come to me? The same thing happened to Saul when he was chosen and anointed king of Israel: *Numquid non filius Iemini ego sum de minima tribu Israel, et cognatio mea novissima inter omnes de tribu*

---

<sup>1</sup> Sor Filotea de la Cruz (Sister Lover of God of the Cross) is the pseudonym of the Bishop of Puebla, México, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz (1637-1699).

<sup>2</sup> According to the classical rhetorical organization of Sor Juana's Answer, the *Introito* begins here. All paragraphs will be numbered at the beginning of each of the 46 paragraphs.

<sup>3</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas (Santo Tomás de Aquino): Dominican theologian (1225-1274) and the central figure in European Scholasticism. By citing biblical and classical authorities and by comparing herself to them, Sor Juana is using the rhetorical devices of *exemplum* and *comparatio*.

<sup>4</sup> Albertus Magnus (1200-1280): St. Thomas's teacher and a Dominican theologian who introduced the study of Greek and Arabic into medieval Scholastic thought.

<sup>5</sup> Quintilian (35 C.E.-95), Roman philosopher of rhetoric. Latin: "They produce more glory by means of benefits given but less glory by means of hopes." Sor Juana writes the Answer in elegant and learnedly rhetorical Spanish baroque style. All of her quotations throughout the Answer are in Latin. I have left these Latin quotations in the main text.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth was Saint John the Baptist's mother (8 BCE-27 CE). In the New Testament he is the precursor of Jesus of Nazareth; his parents were the priest Zacharias and Elisabeth, who was Mary's cousin.

<sup>7</sup> Latin: "Where does this come from for me?" Luke 1:43. Sor Juana's bible was the Latin Vulgate bible, which was principally the product of St. Jerome (347-420). This version of the bible was corrected by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and remains the standard bible of the Roman Catholic Church, with an update in 1977 as a result of the Second Vatican Council.

*Beniamin? Quare igitur locutus es mihi sermonem istum?*<sup>8</sup> I shall say the same: From where, venerable Lady, from where such a favor for me? By chance am I more than a poor nun, the lowest creature in the world, and the most unworthy to draw your attention? Well, then, *quare locutus es mihi sermonem istum? Et unde hoc mihi?*<sup>9</sup>

(3) Neither to the first obstacle do I have anything more to answer than to say that I am worth nothing in your sight; nor to the second obstacle can I express more than wonderment rather than thanks by saying that I am not capable of thanking you in the smallest way for what I owe you. It is not affected modesty, my Lady, but rather it is the naked truth<sup>10</sup> from the depth of my heart to tell you that when the letter your worship calls *Atenagórica*<sup>11</sup> reached my hands in published form, I broke out crying with tears of confusion (and this is not very easy for me to do), because it seemed to me that your favor was nothing more than God scolding me for how badly I return his favors. For whereas he corrects others with punishments, me he wants to reduce to obedience through the force of beneficence. I recognize that I am especially indebted to him not only for this favor as I am for infinite others that come from his immense goodness; but also for the special way he has to shame and confuse me; to wit, to make me, of my own volition, the judge who condemns and punishes my own ingratitude is an exquisite method for chastising me. And so, when I ponder this, here in my solitude, I am wont to say: Blessed are you, Lord, since not only did you prevent other hands from judging me—nor did you even place me in a position to do so—but rather you kept it for yourself, and you freed me both from myself and from the sentence I would have given myself, which my own conscience would have required to be nothing less than condemnation. Instead you reserved the right for your mercy to render judgment, because you love me more than I can love myself.

(4) Forgive me, my Lady, for the digression that truth snatched from me; yet if I must confess everything, so too is it a way to seek an evasion in order to flee from the difficulty of offering a response. I've nearly decided to leave the matter in silence, yet silence would be a negative choice even though it explains a lot by placing emphasis on no explanation; therefore, it is necessary to put a short label<sup>12</sup> on this so that you understand what silence is meant to convey; for if I fail to label it, silence will say nothing, because such is its proper function: to say nothing. The holy chosen instrument was caught up in a rapture to the third heaven, and having seen God's hidden secrets he said: *Audivit arcana Dei, quæ non licet homini loqui.*<sup>13</sup> He does not tell what he saw but rather that he cannot speak. Therefore, it is even necessary to say that those things that cannot be said cannot be said so that we understand that keeping quiet is not not having anything to say, but rather that words cannot convey how much there is to be said. St.

---

<sup>8</sup> I Samuel 9:21: "Am I not a Benjaminite, from the smallest of Israel's tribes? And is not my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such words to me?" (New Jerusalem Bible, p. 354).

<sup>9</sup> Latin: "Why do you say such words to me? And from where does such a thing come to me?"

<sup>10</sup> Notice the use of the Spanish baroque theme of *veras / burlas* in this paragraph and throughout the Answer.

<sup>11</sup> *Atenagórica* means "like Athena" or "worthy of Athena". Athena is the goddess in Greek mythology of industry, the arts, wisdom, agricultural arts, and women's crafts such as spinning and weaving.

<sup>12</sup> Baroque paintings often had explanatory labels (*rótulos*) on them. One such prominent example, in the case of Sor Juana, is her famous portrait. Look at the lower left portion of the painting: [Sor Juana's portrait](#).

<sup>13</sup> Latin: "He heard the secret [words] of God, which man is not allowed to utter." The New Testament quotation is from 2 Corinthians 12:4, although Sor Juana omits the word for "words" (*verba*). In Acts 9:15, St. Paul is called God's *vas electionis* (chosen vessel). In addition to the reference to St. Paul, Sor Juana, as a woman intellectual under attack by powerful churchmen, is implicitly comparing herself also to Mary, who, according to Christian theology, was the "chosen vessel" for giving birth to the "the Word made flesh" (i.e. Jesus).

John says that, if he were to write down all the wonders that our Redeemer did, the resultant books would not fit in the whole world. And Vieyra<sup>14</sup> says about this text that in this verse alone the Evangelist said more than in everything else he wrote. Moreover, the Lusitanian Phoenix speaks very well (but, when does he not speak well even when he's speaking badly?) because herein St. John says everything he kept from saying and he expressed what he failed to express. Hence, I, my Lady, shall only respond by saying that I do not know what to respond. I shall only give thanks by saying that I am incapable of thanking you. And I shall say, by way of briefly labeling what I am leaving to silence, that only with the confidence of one who is favored by you and with the advantages of being so honored, can I dare address your magnificence. If this is nonsense, please excuse it; for it is a crowning jewel of my good luck, and in it I shall send your grace more materials by which you will be able to give better shape to my gratitude.

(5)<sup>15</sup> Because he was a stutterer, Moses felt he was not worthy to speak to Pharaoh; yet, later, after becoming so favored by God, he is infused with so much strength to carry on that not only does he speak to God himself, but he also dares ask him for impossible things: *Ostende mihi faciem tuam*.<sup>16</sup> It is the same with me, my Lady, since what I posited at the beginning as impossible no longer seems so to me, especially in view of how you favor me. For whoever printed my Letter without my knowledge, whoever gave it its title, whoever paid for it, whoever honored it so much (seeing how unworthy of all this it is of itself and on behalf of its author), what would such a person not do? What would such a person not forgive? What would such a person fail to do or fail to forgive? And thus, assuming that I am speaking with the safe-conduct of your favor and within the safety of your goodwill, and furthermore that you, like a new Ahasuerus,<sup>17</sup> have allowed me to kiss the tip of the golden scepter of your affection as a sign that you are granting me benevolent permission to speak and plead my case before your venerable presence, I shall say that I receive in my soul your most holy admonition to apply my study to Holy Scripture. Although it comes in the guise of advice, for me it shall have the weight of law. I am not a little relieved that it seems my obedience, in line with your direction, anticipated your pastoral<sup>18</sup> hints, which you may have inferred from the topic and arguments in the Letter itself. I realize fully that your most sensible warning does not aim at the Letter, but rather at everything you have seen that I have written concerning human matters. Hence, what I said was meant only to satisfy you by writing that text in compensation for the lack of application you have probably

---

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Vieyra (1608-1697) was the famous Portuguese and Brazilian Jesuit theologian (i.e., Lusitanian Phoenix) whose "Holy Thursday Sermon" about the benefits of Christ's love Sor Juana refuted in her *Carta atenagórica*. He was an advocate of freedom, he denounced the severity of the Portuguese Inquisition (he was even jailed by the Inquisition), he worked peacefully for and with the Indians in Amazônia, he was hated by Brazil's slave owners, he was friendly with and defended Jewish *conversos*, and he died among his beloved Amazonian Indians. For more information on Vieyra (Vieira), see the following on-line article: [Antonio Vieira](#).

<sup>15</sup> With this long paragraph #4, the rhetorical section of text, called the Exordium (the introduction to the method proper), begins.

<sup>16</sup> Latin: "Show me your face (glory or physical characteristics)"; Exodus 33:18.

<sup>17</sup> In the biblical book of Esther, Ahasuerus (i.e., Xerxes I, king of Persia, 486-465 B.C.E.) chooses Esther as his queen, and he gives her a carte blanche or safe-conduct to save her people, the Jews of Persia, from being massacred by Haman. Esther 5:12: "And raising his golden scepter he laid it on her neck, embraced her and said, 'Speak to me'" (New Jerusalem Bible).

<sup>18</sup> Notice that Sor Juana is subtly telling the reader(s) of her Answer that she is addressing a pastor of hers; that is someone with the authority to chastise or sermonize her; i.e., a priest or bishop. In other words, Sor Filotea is not a fellow sister or nun.

inferred—and most correctly—from my other writings.<sup>19</sup> And speaking more specifically, I confess before you, with all the candor, truth, and clarity that are your due, which characteristics are integral to my nature and practice, that writing little about sacred topics does not come from lack of application or inclination, but rather from an excess of the fear and reverence those Holy Texts deserve. I recognize that I am incapable of understanding them, and I am not worthy to handle them. The Lord's threat and prohibition to sinners like me instills no little terror in me: *Quare tu enarras iustitias meas, et assumis testamentum meum per os tuum?*<sup>20</sup> This raises the question concerning the fact that even learned men were forbidden to read The Song of Songs, and even Genesis, before the age of thirty: the latter book because of its difficulty and the former book so that reckless youths would not seize on it to change the sweetness of its nuptial songs into carnal crudeness. My great father Saint Jerome<sup>21</sup> confirms this by ordering that The Song of Songs be the last book studied for the same reason: *Ad ultimum sine periculo discat Canticum Cantorum, ne si in exordio legerit, sub carnalibus verbis spiritualium nuptiarum Epithalamium non intelligens, vulneretur.*<sup>22</sup> And Seneca says: *Teneris in annis haut clara est fides.*<sup>23</sup> Then, how would I dare tackle these matters in my unworthy hands, since my sex, my age, and our customs are against it? So I confess that many times this fear has plucked my pen from my hand and has pushed these matters toward the same mind from which they wanted to spring forth. I did not encounter such a problem with profane subjects, because the Inquisition<sup>24</sup> does not punish heresy against art, but pundits punish such "heresy" with laughter and critics do so with their censure. And this particular heresy, *iusta vel iniusta, timenda non est,*<sup>25</sup> still lets one take communion and to hear mass; therefore it concerns me little or not at all, because, according to the opinion of those who slander me for it, I have neither an obligation to know so nor the aptitude to be right. If I get it wrong, then, it is not my fault nor is it a mark against me. It is not a fault because I had no obligation concerning it. It is not a black mark since I had no chance to get it right: *ad impossibilia nemo tenetur.*<sup>26</sup> And, truth be told, I have never written except compelled and forced to do so and only to give pleasure to others. Not only unhappily but also with positive repugnance, because I have never found myself to have the wealth of letters and inventiveness

---

<sup>19</sup> Sor Juana is referring to the fact that she wrote more humanistic works than spiritual or religious works, whereas the *Carta Atenagórica* is highly theological.

<sup>20</sup> Latin: "What business have you reciting my statutes, / standing there mouthing my covenant?" (The Jerusalem Bible; Psalm 49:16). The biblical context indicates that God is addressing the wicked (i.e., with whom Sor Juana attitudinizingly is identifying herself).

<sup>21</sup> Sor Juana belonged to the Hieronymite Order (*el orden de San Jerónimo*), founded in 1373 by Pope Gregory XI in Avignon. The women's branch of the order took vows of humility, charity, prayer, and penitence. In principle, Hieronymite nuns were to spend their lives in seclusion, praying, studying, and chanting the holy hours in community.

<sup>22</sup> Latin: "Then, afterwards, he may read the Song of Songs without danger; for if he were to read it first, he might be harmed by not understanding that he was a wedding song written in carnal words." Sor Juana refers to St. Jerome (347-420) because she belongs to the religious order created in his honor, because he is one of the principal Patristic doctors of the Roman Catholic Church, and because Sor Juana follows his example by being a scholar of both Classical and religious literature. In this passage, Sor Juana is quoting from a letter St. Jerome wrote to a Christian woman, Læta, on the proper education to give her daughter.

<sup>23</sup> Latin: "In youthful years, faith is not yet obvious." Here is an example of Sor Juana's knowledge of a great pagan Latin writer, Seneca (3 B.C.E. – 65 C.E.).

<sup>24</sup> The Inquisition (often referred to in Spanish more properly as the Santo Oficio: Holy Office) was established by Queen Isabel I of Castile in 1478. It was introduced into Mexico in 1571, where it focused primarily on doctrinal heresy.

<sup>25</sup> Latin: "just or unjust is not to be feared".

<sup>26</sup> Latin: "No one is held to impossible things." (Source unknown.)

that a writer's duty requires. Hence, I give the usual answer to those who importune me: For that purpose, what understanding do I have, what education, what subject matter, or even what kind of information, except for four insignificant high school courses? Let those be saved for whoever understands them. As for me, I don't want any trouble with the Inquisition, for I know nothing, and I tremble about uttering some sort of malapropism or twisting the true meaning of some statement. I do not study in order to write, and even less to teach—which, in me, would be colossal arrogance—but rather only to see if by studying I can be less ignorant. This is my answer and this is what I feel.

(6)<sup>27</sup> My writing has never arisen from my own decision, but rather from outside sources. Truthfully, I could say to them: *Vos me cægistis*.<sup>28</sup> What is really true—and I will not deny it (on the one hand because it's well known to everyone, and on the other hand because, even though it might count against me, God graced me with of a gift of an immense love for the truth)—is that since the first light of reason dawned on me my inclination toward letters was so intense and powerful that neither reprimands by others, of which I have had many, nor self-reflection, of which I have done not a little, have been sufficient for me to stop pursuing this natural impulse that God put in me. God Almighty knows why and for what purpose. And he knows I've asked him to snuff out the light of my mind and leave only what's necessary to keep his commandments. Some would say that any more is too much in a woman, and some even say that it is harmful. The Almighty also knows that, since my request failed, I have tried to bury my intellect along with my name and to sacrifice all this only to the one who gave it to me. For no other reason I entered a religious order even though its duties and fellowship were anathema to the unhindered quietude required by my studious intent. Afterwards, once there, the Lord knows (and outside its walls the single person who ought to have known it knows so) what I undertook to conceal my name. But he forbade me to do so because he said it was a sinful temptation, and it surely was. If I could repay some part of the debt I owe you, my Lady, I think just telling you this fact would be sufficient, for never has a word of this left my mouth except for the ears of the person who had a right to hear it.<sup>29</sup> Having just opened wide the doors to my heart and shared its most buried secrets, I now want you to know that trusting you with this information does not contradict what I owe to both your venerable person and your immense favor.

(7)<sup>30</sup> Continuing the narration of my inclination, about which I want to give you complete information, I hereby state that before I was three years old my mother sent me and one of my sisters, who was older than I, to one of those schools called Amigas,<sup>31</sup> where we could learn to read. I followed her with affection and mischief. When I saw she was receiving lessons the desire to learn to read caught fire in me so much that I tried to trick the teacher (so I thought) by telling

---

<sup>27</sup> This sixth paragraph is the second and last paragraph of the section called an *exordium* in classical rhetorical texts.

<sup>28</sup> Latin: "You have compelled me." (Source unknown, otherwise it is standard Latin.)

<sup>29</sup> Sor Juana is carefully referring to a confessor of hers a decade earlier, Antonio Núñez de Miranda. He was her confessor from 1671 to 1681. To place this event in the chronology of her life and the right nuns had to replace confessors, see: [Sor Juana Chronology](#).

<sup>30</sup> The seventh paragraph marks the beginning of the next rhetorical section, the *narratio*. This section continues through the 29<sup>th</sup> paragraph. In a *narratio* section, the author lays out facts or a sequence of events. In the case of Sor Juana's Letter, she now proceeds to narrate her autobiography, which is the central body of this text and of her legal self-defense.

<sup>31</sup> Amigas: These were informal schools organized by well-to-do Mexican women who gave girls from privileged families a rudimentary education.

her that my mother had instructed her to give me lessons too. She did not believe it because it wasn't believable; yet, to reward my clever charm, she gave them to me. I continued going and she continued teaching me, no longer as a jest, because the experiment changed her mind. And I learned to read so quickly that I already knew how to by the time my mother found out; for the teacher had kept her in the dark about it in order to delight her completely and to get a reward at the same time. I kept quiet thinking that I would be whipped for having done this without her leave. The woman who taught me (God bless her) is still alive, and she can vouch for what I say.

(8) I remember that in those days, because I had the sweet-tooth that is normal at that age, I would abstain from eating cheese because I had heard that it turned people into dunces. The desire to acquire knowledge was stronger in me than the desire to eat, even though the latter desire is so strong in children. Later on, when I was six or seven years old, and already knowing how to read and write along with all the other skills that women learn, such as embroidery and sewing, I heard that in Mexico City there was a University and there were Schools where people studied the sciences. As soon as I heard this I began to kill my mother by constantly and naggingly begging her to dress me in boy's clothes and to send me to live with some relatives of hers in Mexico City so that I could study by enrolling in the University.<sup>32</sup> She refused, and she was quite right, but I assuaged my desire by reading many kinds of books belonging to my grandfather,<sup>33</sup> notwithstanding the punishment and scolding intended to stop me. So, when I came to Mexico people were amazed, not so much by my intelligence as by my memory and the facts that I had acquired at an age that seemed hardly enough just to be able to learn to speak.

(9) I began to study Latin grammar, and I think I did not have even twenty lessons. I applied myself so intensely that—since this is true about women, and even more so in the bloom of my youth, that we value so highly the natural look of our hair—I would cut off four to six finger lengths of it, measuring up to where it reached before and imposing a rule on myself that, if I did not know whatever I had planned to learn while it was growing back to its original length, I had to cut it off again to punish my dimwittedness. It happened again and again that it would grow and I would not know whatever I had set as my goal, because my hair grew rapidly and I was learning slowly. So I would cut it off as a penalty for my dimwittedness, for it did not seem reasonable to me that a head so denuded of knowledge—which is a more desirable adornment—should be clothed in long hair. I entered a religious order because, although I was aware that that lifestyle had certain things (I'm talking about incidental not official ones), or rather, many things that were abhorrent to my character—given my total rejection of marriage—it was the least objectionable and the most respectable one I could choose with regard to my desire to safeguard my salvation. In the face of this primary concern (surely it is the most important one) all the stubborn little impertinences of my nature gave way and bowed: that is, wanting to live alone; wanting not to have any obligatory duties that would hinder my freedom to study; being free

---

<sup>32</sup> The University of Mexico (nowadays the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) was founded in 1551 as a Catholic university with the original name of Real y Pontificia Universidad de México.

<sup>33</sup> Juana Inés was the illegitimate daughter of a Basque military officer, Captain Pedro Manuel de Asbaje y Machuca, and an illiterate *criolla* mother, Isabel Ramírez de Santillana. She was born in 1648 in San Miguel Nepantla, a tiny rural village about 20 miles west of the snow-covered peak of the Popocatepetl volcano (17,887 ft.). Her father disappeared early on from his daughter's life. Isabel inherited the nearby hacienda of Panoayán from her father, Pedro Ramírez. Juana Inés spent her childhood on this gracious hacienda, which her mother administered very ably, and it was the books in her late grandfather's library to which she refers here. For views of this hacienda and the volcano, see the following images: => **Panoayán**.

from community noises that would interrupt the peace and quiet of my books. These needs made me hesitate somewhat before deciding, until learned people shed light on them as temptations, which I conquered with divine help, and I took the veil that I now so unworthily wear. I thought I was fleeing myself, but—wretch that I am!—I brought my self with me, and I brought my greatest enemy into this disposition of mine, about which I am unable to figure out if it is a gift or a punishment from Heaven. When all the pious ceremonies involved in a religious lifestyle were extinguishing or blocking my studious nature, it exploded like gunpowder, and I proved the truth of the saying *privatio est causa appetitus*.<sup>34</sup>

(10) I returned to my studious task (I misspeak, for I never stopped); nay, I mean, I continued reading and reading more, studying and studying more, with only books themselves for a teacher. For me studying was a restful break during the moments left over from my duties. It is well known that studying those lifeless letters is hard, that they lack a teacher's lively voice and explanations; yet I suffered all that difficulty very gladly for the love of reading. Oh, if it had only been for the love of God—which was the correct choice—how deserving I would have been! Even so, I strived with all my might to raise my sights and to direct them toward his service, because the goal I sought was to study theology; for it seemed to me, Catholic that I am, a pitiful incapacity on my part not to know in this lifetime everything that can be learned by natural methods about the divine mysteries. Being a nun and not a laywoman, I thought it my duty—given my religious status—to profess letters. This is especially true since I was a daughter of the likes of St. Jerome and St. Paula.<sup>35</sup> How degenerate it would be for an idiot daughter to descend from such learned parents! I argued with myself about this, and I thought I was right. Unless I was flattering and applauding my own propensity (and that's most likely) by relying on the logical proposition that my own pleasure was obligatory.

(11) I proceeded in this way, as I've said, always directing the path of my studies toward the summit of holy Theology. In order to reach it, it seemed to me necessary to ascend the ladder of the sciences and the humanities, for how can one who does not first know the ancillary fields possibly understand the queen of the sciences? Without logic, how could I possibly know the general and specific methods by which the Holy Scriptures are written? Without rhetoric, how could I possibly understand its figures, tropes, and phrasing? Without the natural sciences, what about so many questions pertaining to the multiple natures of the animals used in biblical sacrifices, in which so many symbols have already been explained, with many more unexplained? If Saul was cured by the sound of David's harp, was it by virtue of the natural power of music, or the supernatural power that God chose to infuse in David?<sup>36</sup> Without

---

<sup>34</sup> Latin: "Privation is the cause of appetite."

<sup>35</sup> Paula (347- 414) was a wealthy Roman woman who went to Bethlehem in 385 C.E. where she supervised the building of three women's convents and one convent for men, which Jerome himself oversaw. These were the first convents in the Hieronymite order. St. Jerome followed Paula to Bethlehem in 386. Canonized as St. Paula of Rome she is celebrated in Catholic calendar on January 26<sup>th</sup>, and she is the patron saint of widows. Sor Juana was a nun in the Convento de Santa Paula in Mexico City from 1669 until her death in 1695. For more on Sor Juana's convent, navigate via the following link: => [Sor Juana](#). St. Paula is an appropriate role model in Sor Juana's self-defense because Paula was Jerome's closest assistant, including collaboration with him in his work on the Bible.

<sup>36</sup> The biblical reference is to I Samuel 16:23: "And whenever the spirit from God troubled Saul, David took the harp and played; then Saul grew calm, and recovered, and the evil spirit left him." King David (1085-1015 BCE) ruled the Israelite kingdom of Israel for 30 to 50 years; the bible says he played the harp and he is reputed to have written many of the Psalms.

arithmetic could one possibly comprehend the computation of so many years, days, months, hours, and the mysterious seventy weeks like those found in Daniel,<sup>37</sup> and still more, the understanding of which requires knowing the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers? Without geometry, how could one possibly measure the Holy Ark of the Covenant and the holy city of Jerusalem, whose mysterious measurements form a cube in all its dimensions, and in which the proportional distribution of all its parts is so marvelous? Without architecture, what about Salomon's great temple, wherein God himself was the draftsman who gave the designs and the plans, and where that wise king was nothing more than the foreman who oversaw the project?<sup>38</sup> In this construction there was no foundation without its mystery, no column without its symbol, no cornice without its allusion, no architrave without its meaning, and so forth, in such a way that the tiniest listel served not only to complement art itself but also to symbolize greater things. Without a thorough understanding of the laws and periods by which history is made up, how can the bible's historical books<sup>39</sup> be understood? I refer to those summaries in which what in fact happened first often is placed later in the narrative. Without a firm command of both branches of the law, how can one comprehend the books of the Law?<sup>40</sup> Without vast erudition, what about so many things in secular history as mentioned in Holy Scripture; so many customs of the gentiles, so many rituals, so many ways of speaking? Without many precepts and much reading in the holy Fathers, how can one understand the concealed sayings of the Prophets? Well then, if one is not an expert in music, how do we understand those musical intervals and their beauty that abound in many passages, especially in those petitions Abraham made to God on behalf of the cities, asking if he would spare them if there were fifty just men in them?<sup>41</sup> He reduced this number to forty-five, which is sesquinal (that is, the interval between re to mi); from here to thirty, a sesquitercia, which is that of a diatessaron; from here to twenty, which is the interval of the sesquialtera (that is, the diapente); from here to ten, which is the duple (that is, the diapason). And because there are no more intervals, he went no further.<sup>42</sup> Well then, how can we understand this without music? Back there in the Book of Job, God says to him: *Numquid coniungere valebis micantes stellas Pleiadas, aut gyrum Arcturi poteris dissipare? Numquid producis Luciferum in tempore suo, et Vesperum super filios terræ consurgere facis?*<sup>43</sup> which terms are impossible to comprehend without knowledge of astronomy. And not only these noble sciences; nor is there any one of the mechanical arts that is not mentioned. In sum, this Book encompasses all books, and this science includes all sciences (all of which are used to fathom the one Book), and, after all of which are mastered (obviously, to do so is neither easy nor, indeed, possible), the great science requires another condition beyond everything I have said above, namely, continual prayer and purity of life to beseech God for the kind of purging of the spirit

---

<sup>37</sup> The biblical prophecy of the seventy weeks is found in the ninth chapter of the Book of Daniel.

<sup>38</sup> Details concerning the design and building of the first biblical temple in Jerusalem are related in the sixth chapter of 1 Kings.

<sup>39</sup> In the Catholic Bible, the historical books include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and the two books of Maccabees.

<sup>40</sup> The biblical books of the Law are the five books of the Pentateuch, the Torah itself, the first five books of the Jewish and Christian bibles.

<sup>41</sup> This famous biblical exchange between Abraham and God appears in Genesis 18:22-33.

<sup>42</sup> According to references Sor Juana made about her writings, it seems that she wrote a book on music theory, *El caracol* (the snail). Unfortunately, no copy of this book or MS has been found.

<sup>43</sup> Job 38:31-32. In the Vulgate Bible "Arcturis" and "Luciferum" are printed with lower case letters. New Jerusalem Bible: "Can you fasten the harness of the Pleiades, / or untie Orion's bands? / Can you guide the morning star season by season / and show the Bear and its cubs which way to go?" An alternative translation for *filios terrae* is "children of the earth".



and illumination of the mind that are necessary for understanding such high matters. For, if this is lacking, then everything else is useless.

(12) The Church says these words about the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas, *In difficultatibus locorum Sacrae Scripturae ad orationem ieiunium adhibebat. Quin etiam sodali suo Fratri Reginaldo dicere solebat, quidquid sciret, non tam studio, aut laore suo peperisse, quam divinitus traditum accepisse.*<sup>44</sup> As for me, so removed from virtue and learning, where was I going to find the courage to write? And so, desiring to acquire some of the basics, I constantly inclined to a variety of things without preferring any one in particular, but rather I would study all of them generally. As a result, I have focused on some more than others, but this has not been by my own choice; rather pure chance has put books from some subject area in my hands, and this explains why I have given preference to them. And since I was not moved by any particular interest nor did I have any time limit that might have curtailed the continuous study of one subject—as is required by academic degrees—more or less I would study several things at the same time, or I would turn from one thing to another. Yet even in that I noticed a pattern, because I called some subjects study and others fun. With the latter I would rest from the former. From this it follows that I have studied many things, yet I know nothing, because some subjects have interfered with others. It's true that I'm referring to the practical aspect of those subjects that are practical, for it's clear that while the pen rests the compass is moving, and while the harp is playing the organ is taceting, *et sic de caeteris.*<sup>45</sup> Due to the fact that a lot of bodily repetition is necessary to acquire a habit, no one can ever perform something perfectly if they split their effort among different exercises. But the opposite is true regarding formal and speculative matters, and I should like to persuade everyone with my experience: namely, not only do different subjects not hinder each other but rather they are mutually helpful by shedding light on and opening connecting paths by means of variations and hidden links—for by their Author's wisdom such links were placed in this universal chain. Thus, it seems these correspondences and bonds exist with such amazing harmony and linkage. The ancients invented the story that this chain came out of Jupiter's mouth, and that all things were linked together in this chain. This is what the Reverend Father Athanasius Kircher demonstrates in this interesting book *De Magnete.*<sup>46</sup> Everything comes from God, who is the center and the circumference in which all lines in creation begin and end.

(13) For my part, I can assure you that what I do not follow in what one author has written, I usually understand in the work of another author in a seemingly unrelated field. When those very authors are explained, they open up metaphorical models in other fields. For example, when logicians say, when comparing whether terms are equal or not, that the middle term is to the first

---

<sup>44</sup> The citation about St. Thomas Aquinas is from the Office of the Feast of St. Thomas, in the Roman Breviary (March 7, Fifth Lesson). Latin: "At the difficult passages of Holy Scripture, he added fasting to prayer. And he used to say to his companion Brother Reginald that he owed all his knowledge not so much to study or hard work, but rather he had received it from God." Sor Juana was familiar with the Tridentine Breviary, that is, the Roman Breviary as revised by Pope Pius V following the Council of Trent. The Tridentine Breviary, which is substantially still in use today, was issued in 1568.

<sup>45</sup> Latin: "And so forth with other things".

<sup>46</sup> An English translation of the title of Athanasius Kircher's book is *On the Magnet*. It appears that Sor Juana is referring to his book *Magnes sive de arte magnetica* (1641). Athanasius Kircher (ca 1601 – ca. 1666) was a Jesuit thinker from Germany, who authored more than 40 books. Like Leonardo da Vinci, Kircher is known for the breadth and inventiveness of his scholarly pursuits, which include mechanical inventions, physics, Sinology, geology, medicine, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and much more.

and last terms as a yardstick is to two distant bodies; or that a logician's argument proceeds by the shortest path like a straight line; whereas a rhetorician's speech moves like a curved line by the longest path, even though both end at the same point; and when it is said that the expositors are like an open hand whereas the scholastics<sup>47</sup> are like a closed fist. And hence, I assert no excuse, nor do I claim one for having studied a variety of subjects; on the contrary, these aid one another. Rather, not having taken advantage of them is due to my ineptitude and the weakness of my intellect. The variety of my studies is not at fault. What indeed might testify in my defense is the hard work caused by having neither a teacher nor fellow students with whom I could confer and practice what I had studied. Instead, I only had a mute book for a teacher and an oblivious inkwell for a fellow student. And instead of explanations and exercises all I had was a lot of interruptions, not only related to my religious duties—for you already know how usefully and profitably one spends time performing these duties—but also related to trivial community activities. For example, I would be reading and the sisters in the next cell would have a sudden urge to play instruments and sing. Or I would be studying and two maids would start quarreling and come in and tell me to arbitrate in their argument. Or I would be writing and a friend would come visit me while behaving very badly toward me but with very good intentions, in which case not only must one excuse the interference but also one must be grateful for the harm done. And this happens continually, for the moments I dedicate to my study are those left over from the community's regularly scheduled practices; and those extra moments are precisely when the others come and interrupt me. Only those who have experienced life in community know how very true this is; yet only by the strength of my vocation and because of the great love between me and my dear sisters is my nature able to find pleasure. Since there is union in love, then there can be no separating extremes in it.

(14) With respect to this, I confess that there is no explanation for my travail. Hence, I cannot express with what envy I hear others say that learning has caused them no discomfort. How lucky they are! As for me, not knowledge—for I still know nothing—but only the desire to acquire knowledge has taxed me so greatly that I could well say with my Father Saint Jerome (but not with the good use he makes of it): *Quid ibi laboris insumpserim, quid sustinuerim difficultatis, quoties desperaverim, quotiesque cessaverim et contentione discendi rursus inceperim; testis est conscientia, tam mea, qui passus sum, quam eorum qui mecum duxerunt vitam.*<sup>48</sup> Except for companions and witnesses (I have even wanted for that relief), I can swear to the veracity of the rest of these words. And to imagine that my unhappy inclination has been like that, and that it has even defeated every obstacle!

---

<sup>47</sup> The scholastics are the scholars in medieval European universities roughly from 1100 to 1500. Their method of learning is known as scholasticism. Scholastics sought to reconcile Greek and Roman philosophy with medieval Christian theology. Scholasticism was a method that relied on dialectical reasoning. Using contrasts, the expositors at the same universities (i.e., schools) set up the disputation that the scholastic scholar would carry to a logical conclusion. The expositor expounded on a text without asking questions about it or allowing students to ask questions. After this exposition, a master scholastic would lay out the rational arguments contained in the same text.

<sup>48</sup> Latin: "What efforts I spent on that task, what difficulties I had to face, how often I despaired, how often I gave up and then in my eagerness to learn began again, my own knowledge can witness from personal experience and those can testify who were then living with me." Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (*The Answer/La Respuesta*. New York, 1994, 117) identify this passage and the preceding translation as coming from a letter from St. Jerome to a certain Rusticus in *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, Wright trans. p. 419.

(15) Among other favors, I owe to God a nature that is so mild and affable that it was customary for the nuns to love me because of it, and because they are so good they would not notice my failings. That is why they delight in my company. Being aware of this and moved by the great love I bear them—for they give me more cause to love them than I give them—I would spend the time they and I had free by comforting them and enjoying their conversation. Then I noticed that these moments were taking time away from my studies, and I vowed not to enter any cell unless I was obliged to do so for reasons of obedience or charity. Without such a harsh brake, love alone would have broken my resolve. Knowing my own weakness, I would make this vow for a month or for two weeks, and then, when this period would come to an end, after giving myself a truce of a day or two, I would renew it. That interlude would act not so much as a time to rest (for not studying has never been restful for me) as a time for others—given the undeserved affection my dearest sisters had for me—not to see me as surly, withdrawn, or ungrateful.

(16) This shows quite well how strong my inclination is. Blessed be God whose will for me was to go toward letters and not toward another vice, which would have been almost insurmountable for me. Also, one can easily infer from this how much my slender studies have sailed against the current. (Actually, it would be more apt to say they have been shipwrecked.) Yet, there is even more to say about the most arduous aspect of my difficulties. Up to this point I have only referred to obligatory and incidental hindrances, for, indirectly, that is what they are. What I have left out are the intentional ones that were aimed directly at obstructing and forbidding my praxis. Who would not think, seeing such widespread applause, that I have sailed with favorable winds on a gentle sea; or with pats on the back from one and all? Well, God knows that it has not been precisely like that, because among the flowers of that selfsame applause so many asps of rivalry and persecution have awakened to raise their head that I could not possibly count them. More than any others, the most noxious and hurtful to me have been not those who have persecuted me with their open hate and malice, but rather those who have mortified and tormented with their love and well-wishing. And they would repeat: "This studying is not fitting for the holy ignorance that is our duty; you will surely lose your soul; you will surely fade away in your haughtiness due to your own shrewdness and wit." How much of a heavy price would I have had to pay to withstand all this? What a strange species of martyrdom in which I was both the martyr and my own executioner!

(17) Well, then, because of my twice unhappy ability to write poetry—even though the poems were sacred—what grief haven't they caused me, or what grief haven't they continued causing me! It's true, my Lady, that at times I begin thinking that a person who stands out—or who is set apart by God, who alone has the power to do so—is acclaimed an enemy. It seems that whoever appropriates the applause others think they deserve, or whoever becomes the repository of the admiration to which they aspired, is the one who is thereby persecuted.

(18) That politically barbarous law in Athens by which whoever possessed special qualities and virtues would be banished from the republic so that he or she would not use them to trample upon public liberty, is still in effect and is still observed in our times, although what justified the Athenian law no longer holds. Yet there is another one that is no less efficacious, even though it

has less of a foundation, since it appears to be one of godless Machiavelli's maxims<sup>49</sup>; which is to say that it proposes abhorring those who stand out because they dull the brilliance of others. This happens now, and it always happened thus.

(19) And if this is not so, then what caused the Pharisees'<sup>50</sup> rabid hatred against Christ, when they had so many reasons to feel the opposite? If we look at his incarnate appearance, which of his attributes is more lovable than that divine beauty of his? Is there any of his features more likely to enrapture our hearts? If any human beauty has jurisdiction over our caprices and can bind them with gently desired violence, what might a higher beauty so rightly do with so many sovereign qualities? What could it do? How could it move us? And how would such incomparable beauty not move us, seeing its beautiful face like unto perfect glass through which rays of Divinity were shining? How could that countenance not move us, seeing that through its incomparable human perfections there shone inspiring signs of divine light? If the weakness of human eyes could not bear to see Moses' face after he had simply conversed with God,<sup>51</sup> then what would it be like to look on the face of God incarnate himself? Then, if we turn to his other qualities, which one is more worthy of love than that heavenly modesty of his; than that softness and tenderness of his that poured out mercies in all movements; than those words of his of eternal life and eternal wisdom? Then, how is it possible that this fails to enrapture every soul? How are they not elevated to follow him in love?

(20) Our Holy Mother—my own mother Teresa<sup>52</sup>—says that after she saw Christ's beauty she was freed from being able to bow to any creature whatsoever, because she could not see anything

---

<sup>49</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a historian, statesman, and political philosopher from Renaissance Florence, Italy. His writings on statecraft were considered as amoral as they were influential. Machiavelli's name and ideas, therefore, are synonymous with cunning and duplicity. His most renowned work is *The Prince* (1532), in which he describes how a statesman or prince gets and holds power. Machiavelli believed that a statesman/ruler does not have to follow traditional ethics, nor, in his view, should he. Rather, a prince must focus on power itself; he must follow only whatever gives him political success. In this sense, *The Prince* reads like a defense of despotism and tyranny. The Spanish word Sor Juana uses for "trample upon" is actually *tiranizar* (to tyrannize). In a not so subtle way, Sor Juan is imputing Machiavellian tyranny to her sister nuns and to her superior, the ersatz Sor Filotea de la Cruz.

<sup>50</sup> The Pharisees were a Jewish sect or religio-political party that began in Judea somewhere around the second century B.C.E. Their policy was to reject all foreign influences in Jewish Palestine that threatened the traditional core tenets of their religion. They took Jewish Law as found in the Torah seriously and more or less literally. Their Jewish doctrine was ethical, spiritual, and, in part, mystical. By their strong traditional program Judaism was able to survive the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. According to orthodox Catholic dogma during the Latin American colonial period, it was a standard notion that Jesus of Nazareth condemned the Pharisees unconditionally. For this reason, the word "pharisee" came to be an accepted synonym for self-righteous hypocrisy. In the latter part of the twentieth-century, this view of the Pharisees has been countered with more nuanced views.

<sup>51</sup> Sor Juana is referring to the biblical event narrated in Exodus 34:29-30: "So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him" (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*). This is the famous passage in which St. Jerome, in the *Biblia vulgata*, mistranslated the Hebrew word 'qrn' ('send out rays') by misspelling a vowel and thereby turning it into "horned"; hence, his Latin translation of *facies cornuta* (horned face). Interestingly, Sor Juana does not fall into this ages-old anti-Semitic trap, which demonizes Moses. Rather, she sees a parallel between Moses' shining face and Jesus' transfiguration. The New Testament transfiguration scene is found in Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2.

<sup>52</sup> Sor Juana is using St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582), the great Spanish mystic and founder of the women's Discalced Carmelite order (1562), as a Catholic authority and as a sister and woman who authored a number of brilliant books. St. Teresa's masterpiece is perhaps her autobiography.

that was not ugliness; that is, compared to such beauty. So, how is it that his beauty affected people in such an opposite way? Y since they were so crude and base that they had no appreciation for his perfections, why didn't all the benefits he gave them move their own self-interest and neediness? Didn't he heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and exorcize the possessed? So, how is it they did not love him? My God, that is precisely why they did not love him. That is why they despised him. They themselves said so.

(21) They gathered in their council, and they say: *Quid facimus, quia hic homo multa signa facit?*<sup>53</sup> Is there such an accusation? If they had said, This man is a malefactor, a transgressor of the law, a troublemaker who stirs up the people with his tricks, they would have been lying just as they did lie when they said that. But those legal grounds were more consonant with what they were seeking, which was to take his life. Still, to assert as their grounds that he was doing amazing things does not seem worthy of the kind of learned men who the Pharisees were. Yet, that is the way things are, for when learned men become impassioned they erupt in just such an illogical way. Truly, only for that reason was it determined that Christ should die. O men—if it is even possible to use that word, since you are so brutish—why such a cruel conclusion? Their only answer is *multa signa facit*. God help me, but doing amazing things is cause enough for someone to die! Let's highlight this phrase of *multa signa facit* in light of an earlier one; namely, *radix Jesse, qui stat in signum populorum*;<sup>54</sup> and yet another one: *in signum cui contradicetur*.<sup>55</sup> For a sign! Then let him die! Distinguished? Then, let him suffer, for that is the reward for whoever is marked as special!

(22) Often effigies of the Winds and of Fame are placed as decorations up high on churches, and to protect them from the birds they are covered with barbs. This seems like a defense, yet it is only one of their necessary qualities, for whoever is exalted cannot stand without being punctured by such barbs. Up there the winds' grudges blow; up there you find the severity of the elements; up there lightning strikes with angry vengeance; up there you find the target for stones and arrows. O unhappy heights, exposed to so many dangers! O effigies of the heights, how they set you up as targets for envy and as objects for rejection! Any eminence whatsoever, whether it be of rank or nobility or wealth or beauty or knowledge, suffers this hardship. Still, intelligence characterizes the kind of celebrities who feel the sting the most. In the first place, because intelligence is the most defenseless. Wealth and power punish those who dare oppose them, but intelligence does not, for, the greater it is, the more modest and long-suffering it is, and it defends itself less. The second reason is because, as the great erudite Gracián<sup>56</sup> said, the advantages in the intelligence reside in one's being. There is no other reason why angels are

---

<sup>53</sup> Sor Juana is citing John 11:47 verbatim. Jerusalem Bible translation: "'Here is this man working all these signs' they said, 'and what action are we taking?'". A more literal translation, which is closer to the Greek original, would be: "What are we doing, for this man does many signs?"

<sup>54</sup> Latin: "[that day the] root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples" (Jerusalem Bible: Isaiah 11:10). Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell point out that for Sor Juana David was a symbol of poetry and the humanities "in service of the sacred" (*The Answer*, fn l. 585, p. 120).

<sup>55</sup> Latin: "[he is destined to be] a sign that is rejected" (Jerusalem Bible: Luke 2:34).

<sup>56</sup> Baltasar Gracián (1601-1658), a Jesuit priest, was Spain's preeminent philosopher and essayist of the Golden Age. While he was Rector of a Jesuit college in Tarragona, Spain, he published works on models of courtly conduct. His most renowned work is *El criticón* (*The Critic*, 1651), which he published without permission from his superiors in the Jesuit Order. Paralleling Sor Juana's struggle against her own religious superiors, Gracián was sanctioned by the Jesuits. He published the third part of *El criticón* in 1657 against their opposition; as a result he was sent into internal exile.

superior to humans than because they are more intelligent. And the only way in which humans exceed beasts is in intelligence. Thus, since no being wants to be lower than another, none admits that another knows more, and this derives from wanting to be more. One will suffer and confess that another is nobler than he, or richer, or more beautiful, or even more learned; but hardly anyone ever admits that another is more intelligent: *Rarus est, qui velit cedere ingenio*.<sup>57</sup> That is why constant battering is so efficacious against this valued trait.

(23) When the soldiers mocked, taunted, and amused themselves with our Lord Jesus Christ, they brought him an old purple cloak and a hollow staff and a crown of thorns to crown him as a comic king.<sup>58</sup> Now then, the staff and the purple cloak were insulting, but not painful. Why is it that the crown alone is what causes pain? Is it not enough that, like the other insignias, it should be a sign of scorn and ignominy, since those were the soldiers' goals? No, because Christ's holy head and his divine mind were the warehouse of wisdom. And in this world it is not enough that a wise mind be ridiculed; rather, it must also be hurt and treated roughly. A head that is a treasury of wisdom should not expect any other crown than one of thorns.<sup>59</sup> What wreath does human wisdom expect if it sees the treatment that divine wisdom received? Roman pomp also crowned the diverse feats of their captains with sundry crowns: to the captain who protected the citizens went the civic-minded crown; to the one who stormed the enemy's camps went the military crown; to one who scaled the walls went the wall crown; now the obsidional (or siege) crown went to the one who freed a besieged city or an encircled army or a battlefield or an encampment; and, according to Pliny or Aulus Gellius,<sup>60</sup> for other deeds went the naval crown or the oval crown or the triumphal crown. Upon seeing such a variety of crowns, I wondered what kind of crown Christ had. It seems to me that it was the obsidional one, which—as your Ladyship knows—carried the greatest honor, and its name was derived from *obsidio*,<sup>61</sup> which means siege. It was not made from gold or silver, but from the same gramineous plants or grasses that are found in the place where the feat was performed.<sup>62</sup> Christ's feat involved raising the siege by the Prince of Darkness, who had besieged the entire earth, as he himself says in the book of Job: *Circuivi terram et ambulavi per eam*.<sup>63</sup> Also, St. Peter says about him: *Circuit, quaerens quem devoret*.<sup>64</sup> And our Lord and caudillo came and made him raise the siege with these words: *nunc princeps huius mundi eiicietur foras*.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the soldiers crowned him

---

<sup>57</sup> Latin: "Unheard of is the person who will concede genius." I do not know if there is a source for this saying.

<sup>58</sup> The Spanish phrase for "comic king" is *rey de burlas*. Sor Juana is here deploying one of the key concepts of the Spanish Baroque Age: *veras y burlas*—truth or tangibly true things vs. mockery or evasion of the truth.

<sup>59</sup> References to Jesus' crown of thorns in the New Testament are found in Matthew 27:29, Mark 15:17, and John 19:2.

<sup>60</sup> Pliny (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, 62-113), was a Roman official who wrote descriptions of Roman life. His teacher was the famous Roman rhetorician Quintilian, whose rules of composition Sor Juana is using in her *Answer to Sor Filotea de la Cruz*. Aulus Gellius (c. 125-c. 180) was a Roman essayist and grammarian, who wrote on various Classical topics. He studied grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy in Greece before returning to Rome, where he served in the legal profession. Sor Juana's interest in his writings has to do with his knowledge of Roman customs, rhetoric, and Classical styles of legal defense, all of which she is deploying in this *Answer*.

<sup>61</sup> Latin: "blockage, siege", which Sor Juana translates accurately in the text, of course.

<sup>62</sup> I accept Sor Juana's explanation about the obsidional crown, but I add my own understanding that obsidional coins (not, that is, a Roman victory crown), but rather siege coins, were stamped in gold or silver in whatever the besieged location was.

<sup>63</sup> Latin: "I circled the earth, and I roamed about it" (Job 1:7).

<sup>64</sup> Latin: "[the devil] is circling around looking for someone to eat" (II Peter 5:8).

<sup>65</sup> Latin: "Now the prince of this world is to be cast out" (John 12:31).

not with gold or silver, but with a plant produced in the natural world, where the combat took place, and which, after the curse of *spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi*,<sup>66</sup> produced nothing but thorns. And hence it was that the crown of thorns was the perfectly correct one with which his mother the Synagogue crowned the brave and wise conqueror.<sup>67</sup> When the daughters of Zion sallied forth in tears to witness this sorrowful triumph—while at Solomon's triumph<sup>68</sup> they had gone forth festively—they showed that the wise man's triumph is gotten with pain, it is celebrated with weeping; that is, it is the mode by which wisdom triumphs. It was Christ, as the king of wisdom, who first wore that crown. It was sanctified on his brow so that it might take away the fear of it from all other men of wisdom and so that they might learn that they have no other honor to which they must aspire.

(24) Life incarnate chose to go give life to dead Lazarus. The disciples did not know why, and they argued with him: *Rabbi, nunc quaerebant te Iudaei lapidare, et iterum vadis illuc?*<sup>69</sup> The Redeemer assuaged their fear: *Nonne duodecim sunt horae diei?*<sup>70</sup> Up to this point, it seems that they were fearful because they remembered that earlier they wanted to stone him because he had rebuked them by calling them thieves and not shepherds of their flock. And hence, they were afraid that if he returned to the same topic (for often reprimands, no matter how justified they may be, are badly received), he might put his life at risk. But after being disabused of their mistake and being informed that he is going to give life to Lazarus, what could possibly have motivated Thomas to be as courageous as Peter in the garden and to say: *Eamus et nos, ut moriamur cum eo?*<sup>71</sup> Holy apostle, what are you saying? The Lord is not going to die; what's your suspicion about? Because what Christ is going to do is not to rebuke but rather to perform an act of mercy, and for such an act they cannot hurt him. The Jews themselves could have reassured you, since, when he reproached them for wanting to stone him, he said: *Multa bona opera ostendi vobis ex Patre meo, propter quod eorum opus me lapidatis?*<sup>72</sup> To which they replied: *De bono opere non lapidamus te, sed de blasphemia.*<sup>73</sup> So then, if they say that they do not want to stone him for his good works and now he is going to do such a good work as giving life to Lazarus, what is their misgiving about or what is their purpose? Would it not be better to say: We are going to savor the fruit of gratitude for the good work that our Master will perform, to see him applauded, to render thanks for the benefaction, and to see how they marvel at the

---

<sup>66</sup> Latin: "[the earth] shall yield thorns and caltrops for you" (Genesis 3:18). This is part of God's curse to Adam and Eve as a result of their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Caltrops are thorny plants that are also called star thistle because it has four projecting spikes.

<sup>67</sup> Before the late twentieth century, standard Christian dogma imputed the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ (i.e., the crown of thorns and the rest) to the Jews. Later Christian, Jewish, and secular historical research has shown that the principal executioners of Jesus of Nazareth were the Romans, not the Jews. Regarding Sor Juana's image (i.e., the central Jewish institution of the synagogue), it is clear that she is stating that the female (i.e., mother) synagogue is to her Lord, Jesus Christ, a precursor of and parallel to her own female institution of the Holy Mother (Catholic) Church.

<sup>68</sup> In the third poem of the Song of Songs (Ca 3:11), it says this: "Daughters of Zion, come and see King Solomon, wearing the diadem with which his mother crowned him on his wedding day, on the day of his heart's joy" (Jerusalem Bible, p. 996).

<sup>69</sup> Latin: "Rabbi, now the Jews were seeking to stone you, and you're going there again?" (John 11:8).

<sup>70</sup> Latin: "Aren't there twelve hours in a day?" (John 11:9).

<sup>71</sup> Latin: "Let's go, so that we too will die with him" (John 11:16).

<sup>72</sup> Latin: "I have done many good works for you to see, works from my Father; for which of these are you stoning me?" (Jerusalem Bible; John 10:32-33).

<sup>73</sup> "We are not stoning you for doing a good work but for blasphemy" (Jerusalem Bible; John 10:33).

miracle? But not to say something so farfetched as this: *Eamus et nos, ut moriamur cum eo.*<sup>74</sup> But oh my! the Saint was afraid because he was cautious, and he spoke like an apostle. Isn't Christ going onward to perform a miracle? So, is anything more dangerous? It is less intolerable for human arrogance to hear itself rebuked than for envious humans to watch miracles. In all I have said, honorable Lady of mine, I do not wish to say (nor could such a mistake find a place in me) that I have been persecuted due to my learning, but rather because I have had a love of knowledge and letters—not that I may have acquired either one or the other.

(25) Once the Prince of the Apostles found himself so removed from knowledge personified—as we hear in that emphatic phrase: *Petrus vero sequebatur eum a longe.*<sup>75</sup> So far from the applause of a learned man was he who had the title of tactless that *Nesciens quid diceret.*<sup>76</sup> And even after he was quizzed on his acquaintance of knowledge personified he himself said that he had never heard of him: *Mulier, nescio quid dicis. Mulier, non novi illum.*<sup>77</sup> And what happens to him? Being accredited thus as an ignoramus, he received none of the credit, but instead all of the afflictions wise men receive. Why? No other reason was given except: *Et hic cum illo erat.*<sup>78</sup> He was moved by wisdom incarnate; he had given his heart to it; he followed after it; he styled himself a follower and lover of this living wisdom. Even though he was so *a longe*<sup>79</sup> that he neither comprehended nor attained it himself, nevertheless, it sufficed for him to suffer its torments. There was not a soldier outside who did not provoke him, nor was there a housemaid who did not cause him grief. I confess that I find myself very far from the terms of wisdom and knowledge, but I have wished to follow it, even if *a longe*. But all this has pushed me closer to the fire of persecution, to the crucible of torment; and to such an extent that people have gone so far as to request that I be forbidden to study.

(26) Once they achieved this with a very saintly and unassuming mother superior who thought that study was a matter for the Inquisition, and she ordered me not to study. I obeyed her (for the three months that her authority lasted) regarding not picking up a book; but as far as not studying absolutely anything at all—which is not in my power to do—I failed completely. That is because, even though I did not study with books, I would study with everything else God created by using all of it as my texts, and for a book I used the entire machine of this universe. I saw nothing uncritically; I heard nothing inattentively, even in the tiniest and minutest things. There is no creature no matter how lowly in which we cannot discover the idea of *me fecit Deus.*<sup>80</sup> There is no one at all who is not stunned by intelligent discovery, provided one reflects as one ought to. Hence, I repeat, I looked at and I marveled at all things in such a way that from the very people with whom I was speaking and from the things they were saying I was deriving a

---

<sup>74</sup> Latin: see fn 71 above.

<sup>75</sup> Latin: "Peter followed him at a distance" (exact quotation in Luke 22:54; similar in Matthew 26:58; Mark 14:54).

<sup>76</sup> Latin: "not knowing what he said". Sor Juana is paraphrasing the Latin phrase of Peter's that she will quote a few lines below.

<sup>77</sup> Latin: "Woman, I don't know what you're saying. Woman, I do not know him". Sor Juana has reversed the order of these two statements from the Gospel of Luke. Peter's first denial comes from Luke 22:60, whereas the second phrase comes from Luke 22:57.

<sup>78</sup> Latin: "And this one was with him" (Luke 22:55). Notice that this phrase actually precedes the two quoted immediately above in the New Testament Passion scene of Peter denying three times that Jesus was as his master.

<sup>79</sup> Latin: see fn 75 above.

<sup>80</sup> Latin: "God made me".



thousand ideas. Where could that diversity of cleverness and acumen<sup>81</sup> spring from, since they all come from the same species? What might be the temperaments and hidden qualities that produced this fact? When I would see a shape, I would spend time combining the proportion of its lines and measuring it with my mind and transforming it in different ways. Sometimes I would stroll along the main façade of our dormitory—which is a very spacious room—and I would be observing that, although the lines of its two sides were parallel and the ceiling was flat, my sight imagined that the two lines were approaching each other and that the ceiling was lower in the distance than close by. From this I inferred that the sight lines run straight but not parallel; rather they stretch out forming a pyramidal shape. And I would hazard a conjecture that this might be why the ancients were forced to wonder if the world was a sphere or not. Because, even though it seems so, it might be a trick of the eye by showing concavities where there were none.

(27) This kind of questioning happened to me about everything and it continues happening even though I have no control over it; on the contrary, usually I get angry because it tires my head. And I used to think that everyone experienced the same thing including versifying until experience showed me otherwise. This habit or bent of mine is of such a nature that I never look at anything without giving it a second thought. Two little girls were in front of me playing with a top, and, given this proclivity of mine, no sooner had I seen its movement and shape than I began studying its easy spinning and spherical shape, and I saw how long the impulse of its momentum lasted independent of its cause, for, separated from the girl's hand, which was its motive cause, the little top went on dancing. Not content with this, I ordered someone to bring me some flour and to spread it around it so that, when the top was dancing in it, it could be discerned whether or not the circles it was making with its movement were perfect or not. I found that they were but spiral lines that gradually lost circularity as the momentum decreased. Others were playing jackstraws<sup>82</sup> (which is the most frivolous game played during childhood), and I would come close to observe the figures made by the sticks. Seeing three of them making a triangle by chance, I would begin linking them up, and this made me recall that that shape is said to have been the same as Solomon's mysterious ring,<sup>83</sup> in which there were distant reflections and

---

<sup>81</sup> Sor Juana uses the phrase "*genios e ingenios*," which she probably studied in the first chapter of Baltasar Gracián's work *El discreto* (1646; Trans.: *The Complete Gentleman*). Gracián says that "when *genio* and *ingenio* are joined ... they guarantee shining success", but when separated the result is envy, infelicity, and missing the mark (*El discreto*. Barcelona: Planeta, 1984, p. 49). See fn 56 above for more on Gracián.

<sup>82</sup> Jackstraws is a child's game in which contestants try to pick up as many jackstraws as possible without messing up the pile of wood strips, toothpicks, or straws. Another name for this game is pick-up sticks.

<sup>83</sup> According to Christian, Islamic, and Jewish legends in the Middle Ages, the so-called Seal of Solomon (*Sigillum Salomonis*) was a signet ring that King Solomon possessed and used. This ring (or seal) had magical powers, and with it supposedly he could order demons and speak with animals. For Muslims, the ring gave Solomon the power to summon or control the djinns. In alchemy—a subject with which Sor Juana was quite familiar—the symbols for fire and water are an up triangle and a down triangle. When combined they make up the Seal of Solomon (i.e., the hexagram, the Magen David), which itself symbolizes the combination of opposites and fertilization of the primordial female. Interestingly, Solomon's ring is not mentioned in the Bible. As far as I can tell, the closest the Vulgate Bible comes to mentioning an alchemical notion of the *Sigillum Salomonis* is in 3 Regum 11:5 (1 Kings 11:5), wherein it is related that Solomon "became a follower of Astarte, the goddess of the Sidonians." In the Tanakh, Ashtoret was a demon and the goddess of the Phoenicians, and she represented the power of nature. As a lunar goddess she was used by the Egyptians as a daughter of Ra. In Jewish mythology, Ashtoreth was the female demon of lust. The Greek version of Astarte is Aphrodite, and in the Latin version she is Venus. Following Sor Juana's image of "distant reflections" (*lejanas luces*) above, in pre-Columbian Mayan mythology (another area in which she was knowledgeable) the hexagram symbolized the sun shedding light on the earth. Another interpretation that bears on the immediate context in this portion of Sor Juana's *Answer* is the notion that Solomon's seal is related

representations of the Holy Trinity, by virtue of which he was able to work so many marvels and wonders. It is also said that David's harp was the same, and that is how he healed Saul with its sound. And harps in our days retain almost the same virtue.

(28) Well, then, my Lady, what can I tell you, about nature's secrets as I've discovered them while cooking? I see that an egg becomes solid and fries in lard or oil, while, on the other hand, it dissolves in syrup. I see that in order to keep sugar in a liquid state it suffices to add to it a very small part of water mixed with quince or another sour fruit. I see that an egg's yoke and white have such opposite characteristics that when one or the other of them is mixed with sugar each one separately works well, but when they are combined they do not. Because I don't want to bore you with such cold facts, I'm mentioning them only to give you a full account of my nature—and I think this probably has made you laugh. Nevertheless, my Lady, what can we women possibly know other than kitchen philosophies? Lupercio Leonardo<sup>84</sup> said it quite well: one can philosophize well while preparing dinner. When I see these trivialities I often say this: if Aristotle had cooked stews he would have written a lot more. So, continuing with my mode of cogitation, I tell you that this—that I have no need for books—is constant in me. On one occasion, when I had a severe stomach disorder, the doctors ordered me not to study. I followed their prohibition for a few days, but then I suggested to them that allowing me access to books was less harmful, because my cogitations were so strong and feverish that they consumed more of my energy in a quarter hour than book study would in four days. And so they were brought around to letting me read. Furthermore, my Lady, not even my sleep was free from the endless movement of my imagination. Rather, my thoughts are accustomed to operating more freely and more unrestrainedly during sleep, thereby reasoning, composing poetry, and classifying the species of observations made throughout the day with more clarity and tranquility. From all this I could compile for you an immense catalogue including some very fine logical arguments I have made better while asleep than while awake—but I shall leave them aside so as not to tire you. Let the foregoing suffice so that your transcendent judgment may perfectly discern and form an idea about both my complete disposition and the origins, methods, and state of my studies.

(29) If my studies, my Lady, were merits (and I do see them so celebrated in men), in me they would not be so because I act necessarily.<sup>85</sup> If they are blameworthy, for the same reason I

---

to knowledge and wisdom, which is represented in the figure's center:



<sup>84</sup> Lupercio Leonardo (1559-1613) is Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola, a Renaissance Spanish poet, historian, and playwright. Aside from his admiration for classical style and content, this Spanish writer is an appropriate allusion in the context of Sor Juana's ¶ 28 because he advocated the notion that poetry should be linked directly to moral philosophy.

<sup>85</sup> In ¶ 29, Sor Juana is concluding the *narratio* section of her legal brief-like *Answer* with an argument formulated within the philosophical realm of Thomistic Scholasticism: syllogistic necessity. Using this logic, a proposition is said to be necessary if it is true in all logically possible circumstances, there being no possible conditions in which such a proposition is not true. In other words, something (i.e., Sor Juana's natural proclivity for studying) is said to

believe that I am faultless. But, withal, I always live so distrustful of myself that neither in this regard nor in anything else do I trust my own judgment. Hence, I entrust the decision to that sovereign talent of yours, and, without objection or aversion, I submit myself forthwith to whatever sentence you may give me, for this has been no more than a simple narration of my inclination to letters.

(30)<sup>86</sup> I confess also that, because all of the foregoing is so clearly true (as I have already said), I had no need to give case examples; nevertheless, I have not lacked for support in the many examples I have read in both sacred as well as secular writings. For I see a Deborah<sup>87</sup> issuing laws in military matters as well as political affairs while governing a people among whom there were so many learned men. I see the extremely wise Queen of Sheba,<sup>88</sup> so learned that she dares test the wisdom of the greatest of all sages by posing riddles without being chastised for doing so; rather, because she did this she will become the judge of unbelievers. I see so many significant women: some adorned with the gift of prophecy, like Abigail;<sup>89</sup> others with persuasion, like Esther; others, with piety, like Rahab; others with perseverance, like Hannah, Samuel's mother; and infinitely more with other types of talents and virtues.

(31) If I turn to the Gentiles, the first I encounter are the Sibyls,<sup>90</sup> chosen by God to prophesy the principal mysteries of our faith, and they did so in such learned and elegant poetry that it takes one's breath away. I see a woman like Minerva<sup>91</sup>, who was the daughter of the primary god Jupiter and the mistress of all the wisdom in Athens, worshiped as the goddess of the sciences. I

---

be necessary if it cannot be otherwise than it is. In the next paragraph (¶ 30), she will begin the *disputatio* section of the *Answer*, which is the section in which she argues her case by means of supporting evidence, reason, and logic.

<sup>86</sup> The *disputatio* section of the *Answer* goes from ¶ 30 to ¶ 43, after which the very short final section, the *peroratio*, concludes this work. In what she sees as a (maximally serious) Scholastic exercise, she is the *defensor theseos* (proposer of the thesis; i.e., that she is not guilty) who will use syllogisms to prove her thesis. This is the section in which Sor Juana expects to prove her point of view definitively and, she hopes, successfully.

<sup>87</sup> The biblical stories in the Tanakh about the prophet and "judge" Deborah are found in Judges 4 and 5. This is the first of six cases Sor Juana adduces referring to exemplary women in the bible. Deborah helped deliver the Israelites from the oppression of the Canaanites. Judges 5:2-31, the so-called Song of Deborah, attributed to an Israelite named Deborah, is a victory poem. It is one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew literature.

<sup>88</sup> The Queen of Sheba is a biblical figure found in I Kings: 10. She traveled from a region in Arabia to King Solomon's court in Jerusalem. Bearing gifts of gold, jewels, and spices, she is impressed by both the splendor of Solomon's court and his legendary wisdom. The Queen of Sheba also appears in Islamic tradition with the name of Bilqis. In Ethiopian legends, she is Solomon's wife Makeda.

<sup>89</sup> Abigail is the prophet who wins David as her husband (1 Samuel 25). Esther: see fn 20 above. Rahab is a Canaanite prostitute who hides Joshua's spies in her home in Jericho when he was planning to conquer Canaan for the Israelite army (Joshua 2). Hannah miraculously conceived the prophet Samuel when she was very old (1 Samuel).

<sup>90</sup> The Sibyls were prophetic seers in Classical mythology. There were between nine and eleven of them depending on the source or legend. Sor Juana's source for their existence is probably San Isidro of Sevilla (560-636). The Sibyls are the first of twenty-five exemplary mythological and secular women who buttress Sor Juana's legal brief in defense of a woman's right to think independently, study, and write. Furthermore, this long paragraph is an astounding display of baroque erudition.

<sup>91</sup> Minerva, in Roman mythology, was the goddess of handicrafts, and she was identified directly with the Greek goddess Athena, patron of the arts and trades. Let us remember that Sor Filotea de la Cruz (aka, the Bishop of Puebla), published her essay on the Jesuit theologian Vieira with the title of "Letter Worthy of Athena". See fn 11 above.

see Pola Argentaria, who helped her husband Lucan write the great *Pharsalia Battle*.<sup>92</sup> I see the daughter of divine Tiresias, who was more learned than her father.<sup>93</sup> I see a Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrians, as wise as she was courageous. Also, Arete, Aristippus's very learned daughter. Also, Nicostrata, inventor of Latin letters and extremely erudite in Greek letters. And Aspasia Miletia, who taught philosophy and rhetoric, and who was the philosopher Pericles' teacher. And Hypatia, who taught astrology and who lectured for a long time in Alexandria. And the Greek Leontium, who wrote against the philosophy of Theophrastus and who thereby changed his mind. And Jucia, and Corinna, and Cornelia. And, in fine, all the huge throng of those who deserved their fame, be they Greeks or muses or pythonesses; for all of them were nothing less than learned women; indeed, they were respected and celebrated and also venerated as such in Antiquity.<sup>94</sup> Setting aside an infinite number of other women, of whom books are full, then, I see the Egyptian Catherine,<sup>95</sup> refuting all of the facets of the knowledge of the sages of Egypt, whom

---

<sup>92</sup> Lucan: Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39-65), a Roman poet from Córdoba, Spain. Lucan plotted against emperor Nero's life, but he was forced by Lucan to commit suicide when the plot was uncovered. Lucan's major work is the unfinished epic poem *Bellum Civile*, also known as the *Pharsalia*, whose subject is the civil war between the Roman generals Gaius Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. Scholars generally think that Pola Argentaria did help him write this work.

<sup>93</sup> Tiresias was a seer from Thebes. After capturing the city of Thebes, the Epigoni captured Tiresias' daughter Daphne 2 (according to some her name was Manto 1). Her knowledge of prophecy was reputed to be greater than her father's. She was an oracle and a great poet. Homer may have plagiarized some of her verses.

<sup>94</sup> After listing the last ten female figures from ancient mythology and history, Sor Juana takes a rhetorical breather before launching into a list of famous women from the Christian era. As you can see, all of the following women bear striking resemblances to Sor Juana herself. Furthermore, the following notes demonstrate Sor Juana's extraordinary breadth of erudition. Such knowledge was somewhat normal among the intelligentsia of the colonial Golden Age; however, it is likely that few men commanded all of the appropriate details suggested by the following female figures: (1) Zenobia (250-275 CE) was a warrior empress from Palmyra, Syria, of Jewish extraction; she extended her territory, but she was defeated by the Romans; she was also renowned for her writing. (2) Arete of Cyrene (Libya, North Africa, 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) founded a school of philosophy. The Church Father Clement of Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE used her as a model in his argument that women as well as men can attain perfection. (3) Nicostrata, according to Roman mythology, which renamed her Carmenta, was the goddess of childbirth (midwifery) and prophecy to whom the Romans attributed the invention of the Latin alphabet. (4) Aspasia Miletia (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) was renowned as the very educated and beautiful "first lady of Athens". She was Pericles' consort, but their relationship was deemed scandalous because they never married and because she insisted on being considered an equal to men. Like Sor Juana, she kept company with the greatest (male) minds of her time and place. (5) Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 350 – 415) was a Greek-Roman expert in mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy; she defended science against religion and was killed by a Christian mob who attacked her for causing religious turmoil. Her murder is one of the markers of the end of the Hellenistic Age. (6) Leontion (c. 300 BCE), was a Greek woman (perhaps a hetaera or courtesan) who was a follower of Epicurus and Epicurean philosophy. (7) Jucia (or perhaps Julia) may refer to the Syrian Julia Domna (170 – 217); the Arabian wife of Roman emperor Lucius Septimius Severus and mother to two emperors, she was known for her knowledge of philosophy and geometry. (8) Corinna (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) was a Greek poet from Tanagra in Boeotia, Greece where, it is thought, she was none other than Pindar's teacher. (9) Cornelia (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) was a Roman matron and the daughter of the Roman general Scipio Africanus the Elder. Two of her children became the great tribunes known as the Gracchi. After the death of the first of these sons she retired to an estate where she studied Greek and Roman literature. (10) The pythonesses were women oracles at the temple to Apollo at Delphi. These priestesses were known as the Pythia and "pythonesses" because, when Apollo slew Python, its body fell into an hole in the ground, and fumes rose from its body. The priestess would become intoxicated by the vapors, she would fall into trance, Apollo would possess her spirit, and in this state, she would issue her oracles or prophecies. Echoing Sor Juana's origins, the main priestess had to be an older woman of blameless life who came from peasant stock. Furthermore, like Sor Juana in the convent, all sorts of people would consult the "pythoness" at Delphi on every kind of matter.

<sup>95</sup> Beginning with Catherine, in rapid fire succession, Sor Juana refers to a series of ten eminent women from the Christian era. (1) Catherine refers to St. Catherine of Alexandria (4<sup>th</sup> century), who, according to legend (not

she lectured and converted. I see Gertrude<sup>96</sup> reading, writing, and teaching. And in order not to look for examples outside my own house, I see my very holy mother Paula, adept in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin languages, and extremely adept at interpreting Scriptures. And what more can we say but that her chronicler was the Great Jerome, who, hardly feeling he was worthy of the task, then proceeds with that lively deliberation and energetic efficiency of his and says: "If all the parts of my body were tongues, there would not be enough of them to proclaim Paula's wisdom and virtue."<sup>97</sup> The widow Blesila merited the same praise, and also the illustrious virgin Eustochium, both of these being daughters of the same saint. And the second daughter was so talented in science that she was known as the Prodigy of the World.<sup>98</sup> Fabiola,<sup>99</sup> a Roman, was

---

documented history), was an extremely learned virgin and martyr. In Alexandria, she rebuked the Roman emperor for persecuting Christians, and she converted Egypt's Christian-era pagan philosophers. For her audacious success emperor Maxentius condemned her to the wheel, but miraculously the wheel collapsed. Saint Catherine's beheaded body supposedly was discovered on Mount Sinai in about 800. The Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai dates from 527. Due to lack of historical evidence about her, her saint's day of November 25th was eliminated by the Catholic Church in 1969.

<sup>96</sup> St. Gertrude the Great (1256-1303) of Saxony, Germany, was a mystic and theologian.

<sup>97</sup> Paula (347-414): see fn 35 above. For St. Jerome, see fn 22 above.

<sup>98</sup> Blesila (Blæsila) and Eustochium are the first and third daughters of Paula's four children. Their father was the Roman senator Toxotius. In 379, Paula's husband died, and three years later she met Jerome. The reason why Blesila is celebrated less than her sister is that, after an early marriage, Blesila died in 384. The deaths in 384 of Blesilla, for Paula, and of Pope Damasus I, for Jerome, completely changed their lives. The following year, Paula and Eustochium left Rome to join Jerome in a monastic life in the East. Together, Paula and Eustochium worked closely with Jerome on his biblical and theological scholarship. Paula died in 404, Eustochium died in 418, and Jerome died in 420. A brilliant visual example of how close Paula and Eustochium were to St. Jerome is a painting of the three saints by the great Spanish baroque painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664):



This painting, which belongs to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., was executed in 1635-1640. Here Jerome is seen teaching the two women. All three wear the Hieronymite habit, which suggests that Zurbarán intends to depict them during their later years in Bethlehem. Jerome is also wearing the red cape of a cardinal, which is a huge anachronism, since the office of Catholic cardinal was not created until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This painting was the result of a commission by the convent of Santa Paula in Sevilla, Spain. The original painting is huge: roughly eight feet high by five and a half feet wide.

<sup>99</sup> Fabiola was a Roman patrician who was canonized as Saint Fabiola. After divorcing her abusive husband, she lived out of wedlock with another man. When the latter died, she repented her sins publicly, an act that was greatly celebrated by the Christian population of Rome. She then renounced the world, and thereafter she spent her wealth on the needs of the poor and sick. In addition to supporting many churches and religious communities throughout Italy, she built a hospital in Rome, where she served as a nurse. In 395, she joined Paula in Bethlehem, and, tutored by Jerome, she studied the Scriptures and performed ascetic exercises. Due to a theological dispute, she returned to Rome, but she continued to correspond with Jerome. She died in 399 or 400.

also extremely learned in the Holy Scriptures. Proba Falconia,<sup>100</sup> a Roman woman, wrote an elegant book of Virgilian centos about the mysteries of our holy faith. Our queen Isabel,<sup>101</sup> wife of the tenth king Alfonso, is known to have written on astrology. Omitting other women so as not to copy what others have said, which is a vice I have always abhorred, then, in our own time, the great Christina Alexandra,<sup>102</sup> queen of Sweden, who was as learned as she was brave and magnanimous. Also the exceedingly excellent ladies, the duchess of Aveyro<sup>103</sup> and the countess of Villaumbrosa.<sup>104</sup>

(32) In his *Studioso Bibliorum*, the venerable Dr. Arce, the worthy professor of the Scriptures because of his virtue and his knowledge, adduces this question: *An liceat foeminis sacrorum Bibliorum studio incumbere? eaque interpretari?*<sup>105</sup> And he posits as the opposing argument many pronouncements of the saints, in particular the one by the Apostle: *Mulieres in ecclesiis taceant, non enim permittitur eis loqui*, etc.<sup>106</sup> Next, Dr. Arce alludes to other pronouncements, including the text from the same Apostle to Titus: *Anus similiter in habitu sancto, bene docentes*,<sup>107</sup> using interpretations from the Holy Fathers. In conclusion, he rules, with his

---

<sup>100</sup> Proba Falconia was a Roman patrician actually named Faltonia Betitia Proba (c. 306 – c. 366) who was renowned for her poetry (centos) and biblical study. Centos are poems composed entirely of quotations from other authors. The only extant poem of hers is a cento called the *Cento virgilianus*. In it she retells the bible from creation to the advent of the Christian Holy Spirit by quoting and adapting nearly 700 lines from Virgil. In her reworking of Virgil's texts her long poem reflects a scholar's knowledge of the bible.

<sup>101</sup> Sor Juana seems to have made a mistake here. The only wife of Alfonso X el Sabio (1221-1284) was Violante of Aragón (1236-1301). More likely, I think, Sor Juana is thinking of Isabel I of Castilla (1451-1504), the famous Isabel *la Católica*, wife of Fernando II of Aragón (1452-1516), and who, together formed the couple known as the Catholic Monarchs (*los Reyes Católicos*). Together they united Spain and launched the Spanish imperial discovery and conquest of Sor Juana's region of New Spain; hence, perhaps, Sor Juana's phrase in the text of "our queen Isabel".

<sup>102</sup> Christina Alexandra refers to Maria Christina Alexandra or Countess Dohna (1626-1689). She was queen of Sweden from 1632 to 1654. She filled her court with musicians, poets, and scholars, including the famous French philosopher René Descartes, who praised her brilliant mind. An independent spirit, she refused to marry, may have had lesbian affair, and occasionally dressed in men's clothing. After converting to Catholicism, she abdicated her throne and spent the last 34 years of her life in France and Rome. She is buried in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

<sup>103</sup> The duchess of Aveyro refers to María Guadalupe de Alencastre y Cárdenas (1630-1715), who was a relative of Sor Juana's patroness, the countess of Paredes. She was, as our writer says, very learned in the Scriptures, and she knew six languages: Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. In addition, she supported the Jesuit missions in Mexico, and she was a friend of the amazing Jesuit missionary, polymath, and adventurer, Fr. Eusebio Francisco Kino (1645-1711), for whom Sor Juana wrote a sonnet, "*Aunque es clara del Cielo la luz pura*", and whom Sor Juana mentions in her masterpiece, *Primero Sueño*.

<sup>104</sup> The best I can do to identify the countess of Villaumbrosa is to say that Sor Juana may be referring to the wife of the President of Castile during the reign of Carlos II (1665-1700), Pedro Nuñez de Guzmán, Conde de Villaumbrosa y Castronuevo. He and his wife were instrumental in rebuilding the Real Casa de la Panadería in Madrid's Plaza Mayor in 1672. Why Sor Juana commemorates her in the context of such famous women who clearly represent role models for her is a puzzle to me.

<sup>105</sup> Doctor Arce refers to Juan Díaz de Arce (d. 1653), a Mexican theologian, whose book in Latin to which Sor Juana refers here means *For the Bible Student*. Latin: "Is it licit for women to apply themselves to the study of the Holy Bible? And to interpret it?"

<sup>106</sup> The Apostle refers to St. Paul (d. 62), author of a number of Epistles in the New Testament. He was the foremost and most influential of the early missionaries of Christianity; he was its first theologian, and he is often called the Apostle to the Gentiles. Sor Juana's Latin quotation is found in 1 Corinthians 14:34: "Women in churches are to be silent; indeed, it is not permitted for them to speak." Here begins the core of Sor Juana's argument in favor of biblical authority for her right to read, think, and write, the famous Pauline *taceant* (may they keep quiet).

<sup>107</sup> Sor Juana's quotation is shortened from the Epistle to Titus 2:3. Latin: "Similarly, older women in holy attire [... should be] teaching properly".

accustomed wisdom, that it is not licit for women to lecture publicly in chaired professorships or to preach from the pulpit; nevertheless, it is not only licit for them to study, write, and teach privately, but it is very beneficial and useful for them to do so. It is clear that this should not be applied to all women, but only to those to whom God will have given special virtue and wisdom and who will be most seasoned and erudite and will possess the necessary talent and requisites for such holy work. And this is so right and just that interpreting Holy Texts was forbidden not only to women (who are held to be so inept) but also to men (who simply for being men think they are sages). This holds for all save those who are most learned and virtuous and of meek temperament and well intentioned. Because, contrariwise, I think this is why so many sectarians have appeared, and I think this has been the cause of so many heresies. There are many who study in order to be ignoramuses, especially those who have arrogant, nervous, and haughty dispositions, and who are fond of innovations in the Law—by whose authority innovations are refused. And thus, they are not content until, for the sake of saying what no one has ever said, they say something heretical. About the latter the Holy Spirit says: *In malevolam animam non introibit sapientia*.<sup>108</sup> Knowledge does the latter more harm than ignorance would have done them. A wag once said that one who does not know Latin is not a complete fool, but one who knows it qualifies. And I'll add that this fellow is made perfect—if foolishness be perfection—by having studied his bits and pieces of philosophy and theology and having a passing knowledge of languages; for, possessing those, he is a fool in many sciences and languages: a great fool needs more than his native language.

(33) To such men, I say again, study does harm, because it means putting a sword in the hands of a madman. While the sword is a noble instrument for defense in the highest degree, in his hands it causes death for himself and many others. This is what the divine Texts became when wielded by wicked Pelagius<sup>109</sup> and insolent Arius,<sup>110</sup> by wicked Luther<sup>111</sup> and the rest of the heresiarchs, which is what our doctor Cazalla was—he was neither ours nor a doctor.<sup>112</sup> Learning harmed them even though it is the soul's very life and its best food, because, just as one's

---

<sup>108</sup> Latin: "Wisdom will not enter an ill-disposed soul." This quotation comes from the Catholic biblical book of Wisdom 1:4.

<sup>109</sup> Pelagius (c. 360-c. 440) is the Roman-British monk and theologian who taught that each person possesses free will and, thereby, the possibility of salvation. Sor Juana singles him out for rejection in no small measure because she is an Augustinian nun and Pelagius had rejected Saint Augustine's doctrines of predestination, original sin, and justification by both faith and works. Pelagius was cleared of heresy by a synod in 415, but he was later condemned as a heretic and leader of heretics by the pope, the emperor, and St. Augustine. For a comprehensive on-line article on Pelagius, see: => [Catholic Encyclopedia](#).

<sup>110</sup> Arius (of Alexandria) (256-336) is the early Christian leader and the founder of Arianism, a Christian heresy that denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. In fact, he was the principal reason why the Roman emperor Constantine called Council of Nicaea in 325. As a result of the Council, Arius was exiled, Arianism was condemned as a heresy, and it affirmed that Christ was begotten, not made, and was of one essence with God the Father.

<sup>111</sup> Martin Luther (1483-1546) is the once-Augustinian monk who began the Protestant Reformation in 1517 when he pinned his famous 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany. Due to his vast influence, in religion, politics, economics, education, and the German language, he is considered one of the great figures in modern European history. Although he was influenced by St. Augustine's theology, the biggest difference is Luther's insistence on justification by faith alone without the need for good works. For a rather balanced on-line essay on Luther and Lutheranism, see: => [Catholic Encyclopedia Luther](#).

<sup>112</sup> Agustín Cazalla (1510-1559) was a Roman Catholic priest and chaplain to the Spanish king Carlos I(V) until he became a follower of Luther. The Spanish Inquisition condemned him and he was burned at the stake in Valladolid as a heretic.

stomach becomes quite upset due to a loss of heat and because the gasses it produces become drier, more fermented, and more noxious even when it's receiving the best foods, so too these malevolent men produce similar symptoms, and the more they study the worse are the opinions they engender. Their understanding is obstructed by the same thing that should have nourished it, for the fact is that they study a lot, but they digest little because they fail to limit their intake to the narrow vessel of their minds. Concerning this the Apostle says: *Dico enim per gratiam quae data est mihi, omnibus qui sunt inter vos; non plus sapere quam oportet sapere, sed sapere ad sobrietatem; et unicuique sicut Deus divisit mensuram fidei.*<sup>113</sup> In truth, the Apostle did not say this to women but to men; for the *taceant* applied not only to women, but rather to all who may well not be very bright. That I should want to know as much as or more than Aristotle or St. Augustine,<sup>114</sup> but without the aptitude of St. Augustine or Aristotle, even if I were to study more than both of them, not only would I not reach their level, but, on the contrary, I should weaken and dull the workings of my meager intelligence given the disproportion of the goal.

(34) Oh, if only all of us—and I, ignoramus that I am, first of all—were to gauge our talent levels before beginning to study, or, worse still, to write covetously aspiring to equal or even to surpass others! Then, how much less impetuosity would we display, how many mistakes would we avoid, and how many twisted minds that now abound would no longer venture forth! And I place mine front and center, since, if I were as knowledgeable as I ought to be, I would not write this very text. Yet I protest that I am doing so only to obey you; and I do so with so much hesitation that you owe me more for taking up my pen with all this fear than you would owe me if I were to send you perfect works. But, it is well that it is being sent for you to correct: erase it, tear it up, and scold me; for I shall appreciate that more than all the vain applause others could possibly give me: *Corripiet me iustus in misericordia, et increpabit; oleum autem peccatoris non impinguet caput meum.*<sup>115</sup>

(35) Returning to our Arce, I note that he cites those known words of my father St. Jerome as confirmation of his views (*ad Laetam, de institutione filiae*), where he says: *Adhuc tenera lingua psalmis dulcibus imbuatur. Ipsa nomina per quae consuescit paulatim verba contexere; non sint*

---

<sup>113</sup> Latin, from Romans 12:3: "By the light of the grace I have received I want to urge each one among you not to exaggerate his real importance. Each of you must judge himself soberly by the standard of the faith God has given him" (The Jerusalem Bible, p. 286).

<sup>114</sup> Saint Augustine (Aurelius Augustinus) was born in what is now Algeria in 354 and he died in Hippo, where he was the Catholic Bishop, in 430. He is renowned as one of the greatest of the Fathers of the Church because he used a systematic method of philosophy in his development of Christian theology. Augustine taught rhetoric in Carthage, Rome, and Milan before he was converted to Roman Catholicism in 387. In his vast writings on the knowledge of truth and of the existence of God he used sources from the bible and from Greek philosophers like Aristotle (384-322 BCE). An indefatigable defender of Roman Catholicism, Augustine vigorously opposed the heresies of Donatism and Pelagianism. Augustine's two most influential works are his *Confessions* (c. 400), *The City of God* (426)

<sup>115</sup> Latin: "Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me. / Never let the oil of the wicked anoint my head" (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*; Psalms 141:5). This modern translation follows closely the Latin phrasing of St. Jerome's Vulgate Bible, the version Sor Juana knew well. If you consult recent translations, however, you will find that some contemporary translators have read a different pointing for the Hebrew word translated variously as "wicked" (*peccatoris*). Note, for example, the following translation: "Let the righteous man strike me in loyalty, / let him reprove me; / let my head not refuse such choice oil" (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*; Psalms 141:5). For Sor Juana's purpose, however, the Vulgate version fits her purpose perfectly, because she is not so subtly warning the Bishop (aka Sor Filotea de la Cruz) not to praise her (i.e., anoint her head) if he is one of the ignorant and wicked men she is castigating in her *Answer*.



*fortuita, sed certa, et coacervata de industria. Prophetarum videlicet, atque Apostolorum, et omnis ab Adam Patriarcharum series, de Matthaeo, Lucaque descendat, ut dum aliud agit, futurae memoriae praeparetur. Reddat tibi pensum quotidie, de Scripturarum floribus carptum.*<sup>116</sup> So, if that is how the saint wanted a little girl to be taught—and she was hardly beginning to speak—then, what do you suppose he might want to see in his nuns and his spiritual daughters? The aforementioned Eustochium, Fabiola and her sister Marcela, Pacátula,<sup>117</sup> and others whom the saint honors in his epistles when he exhorts them to pursue this holy career (we know this from the letter I just cited when I highlighted the phrase *reddat tibi pensum*), are well-known reminders and confirmations of St. Paul's dictum of *bene docentes*.<sup>118</sup> Hence, the phrase *reddat tibi* leads us to understand that the girl's teacher must be her very own mother, Leta.

(36) Oh, how much damage would be avoided in our nation if old women were as educated as Leta and if they knew how to teach as St. Paul and my father St. Jerome command! On the contrary, in lieu of this approach and due to the extreme carelessness with which men have chosen to deal with our poor women, if some parents want to have their daughters educated beyond the basic catechism, necessity and the absence of trained older women force them to turn them over to male teachers to teach them reading, writing, arithmetic, music, and other skills. Not a little damage results from this. Every day we hear lamentable examples of such unevenly-matched pairings. Given close physical proximity and contact over time what was thought to be impossible frequently happens with ease. It follows that many parents choose to keep their daughters uncouth and uneducated rather than expose them to such a notoriously perilous familiarity with men. But all this would be avoided if there were educated elderly women, as St. Paul desires, and if the teaching profession were passed from one generation of women to the next just as what happens with sewing and all other customary skills.

(37) Because, what problem is there if an elderly woman, who is trained in letters and of saintly conversation and habits, were to take charge of the education of young women? And not the contrary, by which the latter go astray either due to lack of Christian instruction or to having it given to them by such a dangerous method as the one by which the teachers are men. For if there were no greater risk than the indecency of having a modest and proper woman—one who blushes even when her own father happens to look directly at her—sit at the side of a completely unrelated man who then treats her with both casual familiarity and straightforward authority, then the standard modesty required in dealing with men and in any conversation with them is sufficient cause for forbidding it. Nor do I find that this manner of men teaching women can help but be perilous, save only in the very strict tribunal of the confessional or in the distance at which teaching takes place from a pulpit or in the acquaintanceship at a remove with books, but not in the groping and touching that happens in close contact. And everyone recognizes that this is true.

---

<sup>116</sup> The title of the letter Sor Juana quotes is *To Leta, on the Education of Her Daughter*. Latin: "Thus, her child's tongue must be imbued with the sweet sounds of the Psalms. The very words by which she will little by little get used to forming sentences should not be chosen haphazardly but rather chosen carefully and arranged intentionally. Namely, while she is doing something else, [let her give] the names of the prophets and the apostles, and the whole series of patriarchs from Adam onward, as Matthew and Luke list them, so that she will have them ready later on. Let her daily task be to repeat to you a portion of flowers of the Scriptures."

<sup>117</sup> St. Marcella (325-410) was a Roman noblewoman who associated with St. Paula, and Jerome corresponded with her. When the Goths sacked Rome in 410, Marcella she was brutally attacked and died from the injuries they inflicted on her. Jerome mentions Pacátula in his Letter #28, in which he advises her father on her education.

<sup>118</sup> See fn 107 above.

All things considered, it is permitted only because there are no learned elderly women; therefore, not having them does great harm. Those who are attached to the *Mulieres in Ecclesia taceant* should stop and reflect on this consideration when they curse it when women learn and teach, as if it weren't the Apostle who said: *bene docentes*. Moreover, that prohibition applies to the case to which Eusebius<sup>119</sup> refers; that is, in the early Church women would instruct each other in the catechism in their temples. Now, the sound of their voices was a distraction when the apostles were preaching, and that is why they were ordered to be silent. The same thing happens now, for, while the preacher is preaching, one does not pray out loud.

(38) There is no doubt that to understand many passages in our holy texts one must command a lot of history, customs, rituals, proverbs, and even various speech patterns from those remote times when they were written so that we can know their gist and to what some turns of phrase are alluding. *Scindite corda vestra, et non vestimenta vestra*.<sup>120</sup> Is this not an allusion to the ritual where the Hebrews would tear their garments as a sign of pain, as the evil pontiff<sup>121</sup> did when he said that Christ had blasphemed? Regarding many of the Apostle's passages about succoring widows, don't they also envision customs of those days? How about that passage about the strong woman, *Nobilis in portis vir eius*,<sup>122</sup> doesn't it allude to the custom of placing the judges' courts at the cities' gates? The phrase *dare terram Deo*,<sup>123</sup> does it not mean to make some kind of vow? *Hiemantes*,<sup>124</sup> is this not what public sinners were called because they made their penance in the open air, unlike others who made theirs in a doorway? That complaint of Christ's to the

---

<sup>119</sup> Eusebius (240-340) was a prolific writer, who wrote on apologetics, theology, and history, including a major history of the world until 303 and a history of the Christianity until 324. He also collaborated on the production of the Septuagint, a Greek version of the bible. He was surely one of the most learned men of his time in the Roman Empire. In about 314 he became bishop of Caesarea, and at the famous Council of Nicaea (325), he acted as the leader of the moderate theological faction. He was opposed to splitting theological and metaphysical hairs over the nature of the Trinity. In sum, Eusebius was much esteemed by the Roman emperor Constantine.

<sup>120</sup> Latin: "rend your hearts, and not your garments" (Joel 2:13; The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

<sup>121</sup> Pontiff: Sor Juana uses the Spanish word *pontifice* in its accurate Latin sense of a Roman high priest or chief priest. In English "pontiff" can have the same meaning even though it is used most often to refer to the Roman Catholic Pope. Either Sor Juana is merely showing off her very learned knowledge of Latin or perhaps (less likely) she is allowing for some fairly dangerous allusion. The New Testament Passion episode is found in Matthew 26:65-66.

<sup>122</sup> Latin: "Her husband is known in the city gates" (Proverbs 31:23; The New Oxford Annotated Bible). The song in Proverbs 31: 10-31 is the famous song of the strong woman or wife. Although it is improbable that Sor Juana was aware of this fact, this is the famous Hebrew song "Eshet hayil" that Jewish husbands sing to their wives at the Shabbat meal.

<sup>123</sup> Latin: "To give the land to god". It is possible that this phrase refers to the ancient Hebrew custom, arising out of Jewish biblical law (the Mitzvot and the Halacha), of returning land (i.e., property) to the original owner every jubilee (i.e., fifty years). The laws are set forth in Leviticus 25. However, the Latin phrase does not appear in this chapter in the bible.

<sup>124</sup> Latin: "Those who spend the winter (somewhere)", like George Washington's soldiers who wintered at Valley Forge. The ancient church was distinguished for strict discipline. Before emperor Constantine (325), church discipline was based only on moral sanctions. The object of discipline was both the dignity and purity of the church and the spiritual welfare of the sinner. This system of Christian discipline lasted less than a hundred years. There were four classes of penitents: (1) the *hiemantes* (the weepers; Προσκλαίοντες, *flentes*) who were made to stand outside the church in mourning clothes and to beg for forgiveness and restoration by the priests and the people. The other three categories were: (2) the hearers (Ἀκροώμενοι, *audientes*, or *auditores*), who could listen to the mass being said inside; (3) the kneelers (Γονυκλίνοντες, *genuflectentes*), who attended mass but only while kneeling; and (4) the standers (Συνιστάμενοι, *consistentes*), who could kneel, sit, and stand in the mass, but who were refused communion.

Pharisee who neither greeted him with a kiss nor washed his feet, wasn't that based on the custom the Jews observed regarding these things? And an infinite number of other passages not only about sacred works but also secular ones as well. The latter are encountered everywhere, like the phrase *adorate purpuram*,<sup>125</sup> which meant to obey the king; *manumittere eum*,<sup>126</sup> which means to emancipate him, alluding to the custom and ritual of slapping a slave at the moment of freeing him. And that phrase *intonuit coelum*<sup>127</sup> by Virgil that alludes to the omen of hearing thunder to the west, which was held to be good. Then there is Martial's phrase *tu nunquam leporem edisti*,<sup>128</sup> which not only shows a clever play on words with *leporem* but also alludes to the properties that the hare was said to have. The age-old proverb, *Maleam legens, quae sunt domi obliviscere*,<sup>129</sup> which alludes to the grave danger posed by the promontory of Laconia. The age-old answer by the chaste matron to the bothersome suitor, "No doorframes shall be anointed on my account, nor shall the torches burn," meaning that she didn't want to get married, alluding to the ritual of anointing doorways with lard and lighting nuptial torches at weddings, as if we were saying "Don't waste a dowry on me, neither shall the priest give his blessing." Likewise, there is so much commentary on Virgil and Homer and all other poets and orators. Well, aside from all this, what manner of difficulties do we not find even in the grammar of sacred passages, where the plural is put in place of the singular, or of switching from the second person to the third person, as in that familiar passage in the Song of Songs: *osculetur me osculo oris sui; quia meliora sunt ubera tua vino*?<sup>130</sup> How about the practice of putting adjectives in the genitive case instead of the accusative; for example, *Calicem salutaris accipiam*? And switching feminine and masculine noun genders; or, on the contrary, calling any sin at all adultery?<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Latin: "Honor the purple (i.e., high rank).

<sup>126</sup> Latin: "To emancipate him". Emancipate and *manumittere* both mean literally "send away with the hand." Sor Juana obviously is well versed in the millennia-old Roman law and customs of freeing slaves—since she herself had been a slave owner, and she was well educated. In the pre-Republic Roman state, a slave was emancipated (i.e., manumitted) when the owner held the slave's head and said "I want this man to be free", and takes his hand away from him (literally, manu-mitts him; "lets him go out of his hand"). Or, slightly more demonstrably, the master held the slave and slapped him, thereby turning the slave away from him, freeing him.

<sup>127</sup> Latin: "The sky thundered". I think Sor Juana has misremembered a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which reads: *Audii et caeli Genitor de parte serena / intonuit laevum...* (IX. 717-718). Robert Fagles' translation renders these lines thus: "And the Father heard and thundered on the left / from a cloudless sky..." She has mistaken *laevum* (on the left) for *coelum* (the sky). Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking, 2006.

<sup>128</sup> Latin: "You never ate hare" (Martial 1: 319). The joke revolves around the fact that *lepos* means wit or pleasantness while *lepus* means hare. There is a stress difference in the same form *leporem* for the two different words, however.

<sup>129</sup> Latin: "Passing by Malia where home is forgotten". Malia is the southernmost promontory of the Peloponese. Laconia is also known as Lacedaemonia (Sparta, Greece). Mount Taygetus (2,407 m), the highest mountain in Laconia, looms over Malia.

<sup>130</sup> Latin: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth! / For your breasts/ richness are/is better than wine." (Song of Songs, 1:1; WTL translation). Commenting on the Song of Songs, the most erotic book in the bible, was dangerous for Catholics during the Counter-Reformation, but it was especially suspect or dangerous for a woman to do so.

<sup>131</sup> Latin: "I will take the chalice of salvation" (Vulgate: Psalm 115:13; in the New Oxford Annotated Bible and the Catholic Study Bible, this verse is found in Psalm 116:13). Sor Juana is partly right about the Latin cases in this biblical citation. *Accipiam* is the future of the verb for 'to take', which takes the masculine accusative *calicem* ('drinking goblet', 'chalice'). *Salutaris* ('safe') is an irregular accusative adjectival form that is usually in the genitive. Notice how revealing this full verse is for Sor Juana—like absolutely every other quotation she is using in this legal brief of hers: "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD". She will do this (somewhat Protestant-style or Jewish-style), i.e., call on God, rather than on the Catholic (male) priests and the (male) Catholic hierarchy including the Bishop and the Pope.

(39) All this requires more study than what some men think, who, as mere grammarians—or who, at most, may know four terms of logic in the *Sumulae*<sup>132</sup>—wish to interpret the Scriptures and who cling to *Mulieres in Ecclesiis taceant* with an iron grip, without knowing how they should be understood. In another passage, *Mulier in silentio discat*<sup>133</sup>—which passage is more for women than against them—women are ordered to learn, and of course women must keep quiet while they are learning. It is also written, *Audi Israel, et tace*.<sup>134</sup> Here it speaks with the entire community of men and women, and it orders all of them to be quiet, for it is right for those who hear and learn to pay attention and keep quiet. And if this isn't so, I would like those interpreters and exegetes of St. Paul to explain to me how they understand the passage, *Mulieres in Ecclesia taceant*. Because either they must understand it in the physical sense of pulpits and professors' chairs, or in the formal sense of the universality of all believers, which is the Catholic Church. If they understand it in the first sense, which is its true meaning, in my view, then we see that, in effect, it is not permissible for women to read or preach in the Church. Then, why do they scold women who study in private? And if they take the latter position and they want the Apostle's prohibition to apply absolutely so that women are neither permitted to study nor to write in private, then how is it that the Church has allowed women like Gertrude or Teresa or Birgitta or the nun of Ágreda<sup>135</sup> or many others to write? And if they tell me that these women were saints, that's so, but that does not go against my argument. First, because St. Paul's proposition is absolute, and it includes all women with no exception for saints. In their own time, Martha and Mary, and Marcella the mother of James, and Salome<sup>136</sup> were also saints, and there were many more zealous ones in the early Church, and St. Paul makes no exception for them. So now we see that the Church permits women who are saints and those who are not saints to write, for the woman from Ágreda and María de la Antigua<sup>137</sup> are not canonized, yet their writings

<sup>132</sup> The *Summulae logicales* are a collection of logical tracts written by a certain Peter of Spain (Petrus Hispanus, 13<sup>th</sup> century). They were recommended study by St. Ignatius of Loyola for beginners in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

<sup>133</sup> Latin: "Let a woman learn in silence" (1 Timothy 2:11). Sor Juana has carefully truncated the full biblical verse, which reads, not a little against her case, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" (The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

<sup>134</sup> Latin: "Hear, O Israel, and be silent", which may be a fusion of several verses in the Tanakh/Old Testament; in any case, these four words together are not anywhere in the bible as far as I know.

<sup>135</sup> St. Gertrude: see fn. 96 above; St. Teresa: see fn. 52 above. Birgitta is Birgitta Birgersdotter (St. Bridget of Sweden; 1303-1373). She was a Swedish aristocrat, who married, had eight children, served at court, and went on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, with her husband. On their return to Sweden, she and her husband planned to enter monasteries. When her husband died, Birgitta founded a new religious order, the Bridgettine monastic religious order of Augustinian canonesses. She was renowned for poverty, care for the poor, and visions. Her visions and writings, which were popular throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century, were published posthumously. The nun of Ágreda is María Fernández Coronel (Abbess of Ágreda—Sor María de Jesús; also known as the Blue Nun; 1602-1665). She wrote a monumental life of the Virgin Mary, *La mística ciudad de Dios* (published in 1670). After she died, the Franciscans promulgated the story that when she was twenty-two she had miraculously flown to Mexico five hundred times in order to convert Mexico's native people.

<sup>136</sup> New Testament references to Martha and Mary are found in Luke 10:38-41 and John 11:5, 12:7-8. For Marcella, see fn. 116 above. Sor Juana's text says "Mary mother of Jacob", but since no such person is named per se in the New Testament, and since Jacob is another name for James, I have amended to James. Furthermore, in Mark 16:1, Mary the mother of James and a woman named Salome are named as the first people to go to the tomb of Jesus at dawn on Resurrection Sunday.

<sup>137</sup> In the URL [<http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/bibliotecavirtualandalucia/inicio/inicio.cmd>] of the Biblioteca Virtual Andalucía maintained by the Junta de Andalucía (Spain), there is a listing for Sor María de la Antigua (1566-1617), a Spanish nun in the Order of Santa Clara, who wrote a book titled *Desengaño de religiosos, y de almas que tratan de virtud* (Juan Cabeças: Sevilla, 1678). English title: "Disappointment of the Clergy and about Souls Who Deal with Virtue."

circulate widely. Not even when Santa Teresa and the others wrote were they yet saints. Hence, St. Paul's prohibition only envisions public statements from the pulpit, for if the Apostle had issued a blanket prohibition against writing, then the Church would not permit it. Well then, I do not dare to teach—what excessive presumption it would be for me to do so! As for writing, that requires a bigger talent and more attention and thoughtfulness than I possess. So says St. Cyprian: *Gravi consideratione indigent, quae scribimus*.<sup>138</sup> All that I have desired is to study to be less ignorant. According to St. Augustine, some things are learned as a tool for action, whereas others are learned only for knowledge: *Discimus quaedam, ut sciamus; quaedam, ut faciamus*.<sup>139</sup> So then, what has been the substance of my offense, if I do not do what is even licit for women to do—which is to teach by means of their writing—because I know that I do not have a sufficient fund of knowledge for it, according to Quintilian's piece of advice: *Noscat quisque, et non tantum ex alienis praeceptis, sed ex natura sua capiat consilium?*<sup>140</sup>

(40) If my crime lies in the *Letter Worthy of Athena*, was that piece anything more than simply relating my views with all of the sanctions for which I am grateful to our Holy Mother Church? For if she, with her most holy authority, does not so forbid me, why must others so forbid me? Was it too bold of me to express an opinion in opposition to Vieyra,<sup>141</sup> while it wasn't so for his Reverend Father to express an opinion in opposition to the Church's three Holy Fathers? My understanding, such as it is, is it not as free as his, since it comes from the same backyard? Is his opinion any one of the revealed principles of our Holy Faith such that we must believe it with our eyes shut? Besides, I neither showed any lack of respect due such an eminent man, like that which his defender has shown in this case—for he has forgotten Titus Lucius' dictum, *Artes committatur décor*<sup>142</sup>—nor have I touched the edge of the cloak of the holy Society;<sup>143</sup> nor have I written for the appraisal of anyone other than the one who urged me to write it. According to Pliny, *non similis est conditio publicantis, et nominatim dicentis*.<sup>144</sup> For if I had thought that it would be published, it would not have appeared so unpolished. If it is heretical, as the censor says, why does he not denounce it? Thus he will rest avenged and I contented, for, as is my duty, I value my identity as a Catholic and an obedient daughter of my Holy Mother Church more than so much praise as a scholar. If my text is barbaric—as he correctly says—laugh at it, even

---

<sup>138</sup> Latin: "What we write requires weighty contemplation". St. Cyprian is Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus (c. 200-258), a leader of the Christian church in Africa. In 248 he became bishop of Carthage. When the early Church was of two minds about how to treat those who fled as a result of Roman persecution versus those who apostatized, Cyprian took a lenient view about the first, but he was strongly opposed to those who joined the non-Christian heretics. During the persecution under Roman emperor Valerian, Cyprian was martyred by beheading. He is regarded as one of the most authoritative of the Patristic Fathers because of his view on the unity of the Catholic Church. Concerning her own troubles in the Church, Sor Juana clearly accepts St. Cyprian's teachings.

<sup>139</sup> Latin: "We learn some things in order to know them; others in order to perform them."

<sup>140</sup> Latin: "Let each person get knowledge, not so much from the precepts of others, but may they seize the counsel from their own nature." For Quintilian, see fn 5 above.

<sup>141</sup> Vieyra, see fn 14 above.

<sup>142</sup> Latin: "Grace unites with the arts". I am unable to identify a Titus Lucius who could be the source of Sor Juana's quotation.

<sup>143</sup> The Society of Jesus (i.e., the Jesuits) was founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola in 1534. Vieyra was a Jesuit as were Sor Juana's confessor from 1671 to 1681, Fr. Antonio Núñez, and her nemesis from 1690 onward, the archbishop, Rev. Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas.

<sup>144</sup> Latin: "The arrangement of the one doing the publishing is not similar to that of the one speaking it by name." Pliny is Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (Pliny the Younger, c. 62 - 113) was a Roman lawyer, writer, and philosopher.

though it be what they call a rabbit's laugh.<sup>145</sup> I won't tell him to applaud me, since, as I was free to disagree with Vieyra, anyone will be free to disagree with my report.

(41) But, where am I going, my Lady? For all of this is out of place here, nor is it for your ears; instead, as I am in the process of dealing with my challengers, I've recalled the phrases of one of them who's just appeared, and distractedly my pen slipped when I was trying to reply to him in particular, my intent being to speak in general. And so, to return to our Arce, he says that he knew two nuns in this city, one of them in the Regina Convent. This one had committed the Breviary to memory so well that she could apply its verses, psalms, and maxims from the saints' homilies to her conversations with immense speed and appropriateness. The other one, who was in the Convent of the Conception, was so accustomed to reading the Epistles of my father St. Jerome and she knew his sayings so well that Arce says: *Hieronymum ipsum hispane loquentem audire me existimarem*.<sup>146</sup> And he says about the second nun that, after her death, he learned she had translated said Epistles into Spanish; and it hurt him that such talents had not been employed in greater studies grounded in scientific principles. Although he does not name either one of them, he mentions them as support for his maxim, which is that the study of holy letters is not only licit—nay, it is also most useful and necessary—for women, and much more so for nuns. This is the selfsame thing to which your sound judgment exhorts me and about which so many cogent arguments concur.

(42) Now, if I turn my eyes to the ever so persecuted skill of writing poetry—which is so natural for me that I'm even struggling mightily within myself to avoid writing this letter in verse, and I might even agree with the phrase about *Quidquid conabar dicere, versus erat*<sup>147</sup>—seeing it condemned and stigmatized so much by so many, I have searched most diligently to discover what harm it might contain, but I have not found any. On the contrary, I see poetry praised in the mouths of the Sibyls;<sup>148</sup> sanctified by the pens of the prophets, especially King David's, of which my beloved Father and a great exegete said after examining his prosody: *In morem Flacci et Pindari nunc iambo currit, nunc alcaico personat, nunc sapphico tumet, nunc semipede ingreditur*.<sup>149</sup> Most sacred books are written in verse, like the Canticle of Moses; and about the lines in Job, San Isidro says in his *Etymologies*<sup>150</sup> that they are written in heroic meter. Solomon wrote the *Epithalamia* in poetry,<sup>151</sup> and so did Jeremiah in Lamentations. Cassiodorus

---

<sup>145</sup> The Spanish expression *risa del conejo* (rabbit's laugh) refers to an unwilling laugh.

<sup>146</sup> Latin: "I would form the opinion I was hearing Jerome himself speaking in Spanish."

<sup>147</sup> Latin: "Whatever I would be inclined to say, it would be in verse".

<sup>148</sup> Sibyls: see fn 90 above.

<sup>149</sup> Latin: "In the usage of Horace and Pindar, now it runs in iambs, now it sounds in the Alcaic meter [poetic form named after Alcaeus, Greek poet, c. 600 BCE], now it swells in Sapphic meter [named after the Greek poet from Lesbos, 620-565 BCE], now in half-feet it steps along." For king David the Psalmist, see fn 36 above. Sor Juana's "beloved Father", is, of course, St. Jerome. The quotation is from Jerome's introduction to the second book of Eusebius Pamphilus's *Chronicle*. In the Latin, Flacci refers to Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace, 65-8 BCE), the renowned Roman poet and satirist.

<sup>150</sup> San Isidro (St. Isidore) of Sevilla (560-635) was a major Visigothic Spanish Catholic theologian, archbishop, and encyclopedist whose monumental work was the *Etimologiae*. In this work San Isidro attempted to compile all known secular and religious knowledge. It was a popular textbook and standard reference work from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The Canticle of Moses is found in Exodus 15:1-19.

<sup>151</sup> The *Epithalamia* are the wedding songs in the Song of Songs.

says this: *Omnis poetica locutio a Divinis scripturis sumpsit exordium*.<sup>152</sup> Well then, our Catholic Church not only does not scorn poems, but rather it uses them in its hymns, and it recites those of St. Ambrose,<sup>153</sup> St. Thomas, San Isidro, and others. St. Bonaventure was so fond of them that there is hardly a page of his without verses of poetry. Clearly, St. Paul had studied verses, for he cites them, and he translates one from Aratus: *In ipso enim vivimus, et movemur, et sumus*,<sup>154</sup> and he adduces another from Parmenides: *Cretenses semper mendaces, malae bestiae pigri*.<sup>155</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>156</sup> debates the questions of matrimony and virginity in elegant poetry. So, why should I go on tiring myself out? The Queen of Wisdom and our Lady, with her holy lips intoned the Cantic of the Magnificat.<sup>157</sup> Now that I have brought her forward as my prime example, it would be offensive to adduce profane examples even though they be from the most serious and learned of men, for what I have said is proof enough. Although we see that Hebrew eloquence could not be squeezed into Latin meters, which is why the holy translator,<sup>158</sup> who was more attentive to the primacy of the meaning, omitted the verse; even so, the Psalms retain the name and division of verses. Then, what harm can verses have in themselves? Because misuse is not the fault of the art, but rather it is the fault of the bad professor who vitiates verse writing by turning it into a trap of the devil. And this occurs in all school and realms of knowledge.

(43)<sup>159</sup> Therefore, if the evil lies in verses being used by a woman, we have already seen how many women have used them commendably. Then, what is the problem with me being one? Of course, I confess my baseness and my base, vile nature; but I maintain that no one has ever seen an indecent poem of mine. Moreover, I have never written anything of my own volition, but rather at the request or directive of others. As a result the only thing I recall writing for my own pleasure is a little piece called the *Dream*.<sup>160</sup> That letter that you honored so much, my Lady, I wrote with more reluctance than anything else.<sup>161</sup> I felt that way because it dealt with sacred

---

<sup>152</sup> Latin: "All poetical speech took its beginning from the Holy Scriptures." Cassiodorus (490-585) founded the monastery of Vivarium in Bruttium (now Apulia, Italy) where monks preserved and translated Classical and Christian manuscripts.

<sup>153</sup> St. Ambrose (c. 339-397) is one of the Fathers of the Church. He became bishop of Milan in 374; he befriended Saint Augustine's mother Monica; and he received Augustine into the Church. His writings include hymns, exegetical treatises, and a manual of Christian morality.

<sup>154</sup> Latin: "For in him we live and move and have our being." This verse is found in Acts 17:28: it is attributed to Epimenides. The line in the Acts of the Apostles 17:28 that is attributed nowadays to Aratus, a Stoic Greek poet from Cilicia, follows the one cited.

<sup>155</sup> Latin: "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." This verse is cited in Titus 1:12, where St. Paul is telling Titus that even "their very own prophet" (i.e., Epimenides; not Parmenides, as Sor Juana thinks) is warning about "deceivers" who "must be silenced". Translations from the New Oxford Annotated Bible.

<sup>156</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, (c. 329-389) was a Father of the Church and one of the four Eastern Doctors of the Church. In Constantinople he gave famous theological sermons on the Trinity. His prolific writings include 407 poems.

<sup>157</sup> The Magnificat is found in Luke 1:46-55.

<sup>158</sup> The reference is to St. Jerome, who translated biblical Greek and Hebrew texts into the Latin of the Vulgate, the official Roman Catholic version of the bible that Sor Juana is citing.

<sup>159</sup> Paragraph 43 is the last and concluding paragraph in the core (i.e., *disputatio*) section of the *Answer* before the short and succinct final (i.e., *peroratio*) section. Paragraph 43 is also the longest, most intense paragraph in the entire document. While reading it, it is worth noting that it is constructed in two parts.

<sup>160</sup> For an earlier reference to this poem (1685; *Dream*; i.e., *el Sueño* or *Primer Sueño*), see fn 103 above. It is anything but a small, trifling poem. On the contrary, it is long (975 lines), extremely complex, and stunningly brilliant. In fact, I consider it one of the masterpieces of baroque literature in Spanish or any other language.

<sup>161</sup> Again, the reference is to her *Carta atenagórica* (Letter Worthy of Athena), the crux of her life as an intellectual and the motivation for defending herself in this *Respuesta / Answer*.

things for which—as I have said—I have a reverent fear and because it gave the appearance of trying to be a contestation, and this is something about which I have a natural aversion. And I believe that if I could have foreseen the happy destiny for which it was born (for, as if it were another Moses, I tossed it like a foundling onto the Nile-like waters of silence, where a princess like you found it and embraced it);<sup>162</sup> and, again I say, I believe that if I had imagined such a thing, I would have quickly drowned it with the very hands that gave it birth because I would have feared that my ignorant, clumsy inkblots might stand revealed in the light of your wisdom. From this we are aware of the nobility of your goodness, for your goodwill is applauding the very thing that your brilliant mind no doubt is rejecting. But now that the letter's own fortune has dropped it at your doors—so orphaned a foundling that you yourself have given it its name—it troubles me that among all its other deformities it also betrays the defect of being dashed off. Such haste is due both to the poor health I continually suffer and to the extra tasks my vow of obedience imposes on me; and also lacking someone who might aid me in my writing; and also needing all of it to be in my own hand; and because, since I was going against my own character and I only wanted to keep the word I had given to the person I could not disobey, I couldn't wait to be finished. Hence, I refrained from including whole arguments and many proofs that occurred to me, and I left them out for the sake of not writing more. If I had known that it was destined to be printed I would not have omitted them, even if it were only to satisfy some objections that have arisen. I could send them to you, but I shall not be so thoughtless as to subject the purity of your eyes to such indecent objects, for it is enough that my manifold ignorance offends your eyes without me remitting these things to the impudence of others. If they should fly about on their own—they're so light and flimsy that they surely will—you must order me concerning what I should do. If your instructions do not command otherwise, I shall never pick up my pen concerning my own defense because it seems to me that whoever recognizes his mistake in the same thing he's hiding does not need someone else to answer in his place. As my father St. Jerome says, *bonus sermo secreta non quaerit*.<sup>163</sup> And St. Ambrose: *latere criminosae est conscientiae*.<sup>164</sup> Nor do I consider myself impugned, for a rule of law says, *Accusatio non tenetur si non curat de persona, quae produxerit illam*.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, what is to be considered is the trouble it has cost him to go around making copies. What a strange madness: to exhaust yourself more by removing credit from yourself than you could get winning it. I, my Lady, have not wished to answer even though others have done so without my knowledge. It suffices that I have seen some papers, and among them one scholarly one that I'm sending you because, by reading it, you will make up for part of the time I have caused you to lose by reading the things I write. If you, my Lady, should like me to do the opposite of what I had put forward for your judgment and consideration, then, as is right, my decision will cede to the least sign of your pleasure, which, as I have said, was to be silent, because, although St. John Chrysostom says, *calumniatores convincere oportet, interrogatores docere*,<sup>166</sup> I also see that St. Gregory says, *Victoria non minor est, hostes tolerare, quam hostes vincere*.<sup>167</sup> And patience conquers through tolerance, and it triumphs by suffering. Indeed, was it not a custom among the Roman pagans, when they were

---

<sup>162</sup> This biblical episode is found in Exodus 2:3. Curiously, the Vulgate does not identify the river specifically as the Nile.

<sup>163</sup> Latin: "Honest discourse does not seek private solitude."

<sup>164</sup> Latin: "A reproachful consciousness is to be concealed."

<sup>165</sup> Latin: "An accusation cannot be upheld if it fails to pay attention to the character of the person who produced it."

<sup>166</sup> Latin: "One should prove slanderers wrong, and one should teach interrogators." St. John Chrysostom (347-407) was a Greek doctor of the Church. He was renowned for eloquence, asceticism, and charity.

<sup>167</sup> Latin: "It is not a lesser victory to tolerate enemies than to vanquish enemies." For St. Gregory, see fn 156.



celebrating the exalted glory of their captains—who, upon returning after triumphing over foreign nations, all clothed in royal purple and wearing crowns of laurel and their chariots being pulled not by beasts of burden but by the crowned brows of vanquished kings, and accompanying them both the looted riches of the entire world and the men of their conquering army decorated with the emblems of their feats, and hearing the crowd cheering their acclaim with such honorable and illustrious titles as Fathers of the Homeland, Pillars of the Empire, Ramparts of Rome, Refuge of the Republic, and other glorious names—that, at this supreme peak of glory and human joy, a common soldier should cry out in a loud voice saying to the conqueror (as if expressing both his own feeling and an order of the Senate): "Hey, how mortal you are; hey, you have such and such a defect!"—and they did not avoid the most shameful ones, like what happened at the triumphal entrance of Cesar when the lowest soldiers shouted within his earshot: *Cavete romani, adducimus vobis adulterum calvum*.<sup>168</sup> Which was done so that, in the midst of so much honor, the conqueror would not be overcome with vanity, so that the burden of the insults would constitute a counterweight to the sails of so much applause, and so that the ship of sound judgment would not be endangered by the winds of so much acclaim. I repeat, if some pagans did this, having only the light of Natural Law, then we Catholics, having our commandment to love our enemies, is it asking too much for us to tolerate them? For my part, I can swear that sometimes these calumnies have mortified me, but they have never done me harm. I consider it most foolish for someone who has the chance to earn respect instead makes the effort and then loses the reward; for this is like those who refuse to resign themselves to dying but in the end they die, their effort to avoid death being useless; their resistance taking from them the merit of resignation, and instead turning into a bad death a death that could have been a blessing.<sup>169</sup> And so, my Lady, these things, I think, are more helpful than hurtful. I maintain that praise presents a greater danger for human frailty, for it usually appropriates what does not belong to it, and it is necessary to proceed very carefully and to keep these words of the Apostle written on one's heart: *Quid autem habes quod non accepisti? Si autem accepisti, quid gloriaris quasi non acceperis?*<sup>170</sup> so that they serve as a shield that protects against the spearheads of praise, for praise is a spear that, when not attributed to God to whom it does belong, takes our lives and makes us thieves of God's honor and usurpers of the talents he gave us and the gifts he loaned us and about which we shall be required to give a very exacting account. And so, good Lady, I fear the latter—praise—more than the former—calumny. Because calumny, by virtue of only one simple act of patience, is turned into a benefit; whereas praise requires many acts of self-reflection, humility, and self-knowledge for it not to be harmful. And so, as for myself, I realize and recognize that knowing this to be so is a special favor from God; that is, knowing how to behave in the face of either the latter or the former, according to St. Augustine's maxim of *Amico laudanti credendum non est sicut nec inimico detrahenti*.<sup>171</sup> Although I am the type who most often has to either spoil something or to mix it with such

---

<sup>168</sup> Latin: "Beware, Romans, for we are bringing the bald adulterer to you."

<sup>169</sup> As noted above (fn 159), the first of the two parts of this long conclusion to the *disputatio* section of the Answer ends here, and the second part begins in the next sentence. Both parts, logically, therefore, belong in the same very long paragraph. The rhetorical device that drives this second part of this pre-conclusion (the final section, the *peroratio*, is the actual *envoi* or conclusion) is an anaphora based on two beginning words (*Y asi*) of each of four substantial sentences: "And so..."

<sup>170</sup> Latin: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast, as if it were not a gift?" St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7 (The New Oxford Annotated Bible).

<sup>171</sup> Latin: "The friend who praises is not to be believed just as neither is the enemy who disparages." This quotation is found in St. Augustine's *Contra litteras Petiliani donatistae*, ¶10.

defects and imperfections that I wreck what might have been good if left alone. And so, among the few things of mine that have been printed, not only my name but not even my permission for them to be printed was by my own decision; rather, it was done by someone else's leave outside my control. This was the case with the printing of the "Letter Worthy of Athena". Hence, only some *Exercises for the Incarnation* and some *Offerings for the Sorrows* pleased me when they were printed for public devotional services, but they appeared without my name. I'm sending some copies of them to you so that (if you approve) you can distribute them among our sisters the nuns of your holy community and others in your city. Of the *Sorrows* I'm sending only one because we've run out of them and I couldn't find any more. I made them years ago out of devotion to my sisters, and afterwards they circulated widely. Their subjects are as disproportionate to my tepidness as they are to my ignorance, but I was helped out only because they have to do with our great Queen: I do not know what the cause is, but the coldest heart becomes enflamed when dealing with our Most Holy Mary. How I should like, my venerable Lady, to send you works worthy of your virtue and wisdom, but, as the Poet said:

*Ut desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas:  
hac ego contentos, auguror esse Deos.*<sup>172</sup>

(44)<sup>173</sup> If I ever were to write some other little things, they will always go searching for sanctuary at your feet and the safety of your correction, for I have no other jewel with which to repay you; and I feel like Seneca, the one who, after he began doing acts of goodness found he was obliged to continue them. In this way, you shall be repaid with your own liberality, for only thus will I be able to discharge my debt to you with dignity and, again, without having that familiar saying of Seneca charged against me: *Turpe est beneficiis vinci.*<sup>174</sup> For it is dashing loftiness on the part of a generous creditor to give the poor debtor a means with which he can

---

<sup>172</sup> Latin: "As our strength ceases, nevertheless the inclination is to be praised: / Content with that, I guess the gods to be." The "Poet" is Ovid. Ovid (43 BCE -17CE?), was a Roman poet who demonstrated unmatched narrative ability, art of rhetoric, and poetical virtuosity. He was the most popular of the Roman poets; hence, Sor Juana does not need to identify him more than by calling him the Poet by antonomasia. Ovid's licentious poetry ran counter to the social and moral renewal politics promulgated by Emperor Augustus following Rome's civil wars during the middle of the first century before the Common Era. The citation comes from Ovid's *Epistolae ex Ponto* 3.4.79-80. This work consists of poetic letters about his sad life in exile from Rome. Ovid's most famous works are *Ars Amatoria*, a poem on the art of love, and *Metamorphoses*. The latter reads like a witty handbook of Greek mythology from creation of the world to the time of Julius Caesar. Ovid led a fairly licentious and scandalous life, and he had such a powerful mind that he offended his superiors and ended his life in exile. By the time he was thirty he had been married three times and divorced twice, and he had an affair with the woman known as Corinna in his poetry. Why would Sor Juana end the core of her self-defense brief by citing and referencing Ovid? The sense of the Ovidian verses as applied to Sor Juana is clear, but, immediately after piously praising St. Mary, Sor Juana shifts back into her scholarly mode by flaunting her profound knowledge of the quintessentially "man's writer", Ovid. Why? How does this buttress her case?

<sup>173</sup> Here begins the last section of the *Answer* as organized according to the protocols of classical rhetoric: the *peroratio*. In this section the speaker or writer sums up the speech or text's major points and urges the listener or reader to agree with them with final earnestness.

<sup>174</sup> Latin: "It's disgraceful to be defeated in acts of kindness." Marcus (Lucius) Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C.E.- c.65 C.E.) was a famous Roman philosopher, playwright, and tutor to the emperor. He was born in Córdoba, Spain. He was influenced by the philosophy of stoicism, which philosophy may suggest why Sor Juana invokes him now. In retirement, Seneca devoted himself to study and writing, as Sor Juana seeks to do. In 65 C.E., however, he encountered a serious impediment to his true vocation of study: he was implicated in a conspiracy to kill Nero, so he committed suicide by the emperor's order. Do we detect here Sor Juana's sense that she too will soon be required to commit a kind of intellectual suicide?

satisfy the debt. This is what God did with the world that has no possibility to repay him: he gave his own Son so that he might offer himself as a worthy debt satisfaction.

(45) If the style of this letter, my venerable Lady, may not have been as is owed you, I ask for your forgiveness for its homey familiarity or for speaking in the less authorized tone as I have been doing when addressing you as a nun of the veil, my sister; for I have forgotten the distance from your distinguished person; but, this would not have occurred if I had seen you without a veil. However, you, with your good sense and your benevolence, surely will substitute or emend my terminology. If the familiar form of "you" that I have used seems incongruous to you—to me, given the reverence I owe you, it seems "Your Reverence" is very little reverence—switch it for one that seems consonant with what you deserve, for I have not dared overstep the bounds of your style<sup>175</sup> nor to cross the line surrounding your modesty.

(46) Then, hold me in your grace so as to beseech divine grace on my behalf. May the Lord grant you great abundance, and may he keep you, as I beg him and as I too have need. In this Convent of our father St. Jerome, Mexico City, the first day of the month of March, the year one thousand six hundred ninety-one. Kissing your hand, your most favored,



---

<sup>175</sup> As a consummate baroque writer and intellectual, Sor Juana is fully aware of the dangerous traps encoded into baroque stylistics, language, religiosity, logic, and the rest. Here she recognizes that the Bishop—half disguised as the nun Sor Filotea, which is already a trap of style and identify—has set up all sorts of parameters within which Sor Juana must operate. This is why, in her *peroratio*, she is calling attention to the fact that the style she has deployed in her *Answer* matches the style encoded in the Bishop's tricky letter to her.

**Sor Juana: "The Answer"**  
**Complete List of Citations and References**

**Biblical Citations**

**Tanakh / Old Testament**

Genesis 3:18, p. 15  
Genesis 18:22-33, p. 8  
Exodus 2:3, p. 32  
Exodus 15:1-19, fn, p. 30  
Exodus 33:18, p. 3  
Exodus 34:29-30, p. 12  
Leviticus 25, fn, p. 26  
1 Samuel 9:21, p. 2  
1 Samuel 16:23, p. 7  
1 Kings (biblical book), fn, p. 8  
1 Kings 11:5, fn, p. 17  
Esther 5:12, p. 3  
Job 1:7, p. 14  
Job 38:31-32, p. 8  
Psalms 49:16, p. 4  
Psalms 115:13, p. 27  
Psalms 141:5, p. 24  
Wisdom 1:4  
Song of Songs 1:1, p. 27  
Song of Songs 3:11, p. 15  
Proverbs 31:23, p. 26  
Isaiah 11:10, p. 13  
Joel 2:13, p. 26

**New Testament**

Matthew 26:65-66, p. 26  
Luke 1:43, p. 1  
Luke 1:46-55, p. 31  
Luke 2:34, p. 13  
Luke 10:38-41, fn, p. 28  
Luke 22:54, p.16  
Luke 22:55, p. 16  
Luke 22:57, p. 16  
Luke 22:60, p. 16  
John 10:32-33, p. 15  
John 11:5, 12:7-8, fn, p. 28  
John 11:8, p. 15  
John 11:9, p. 15

John 11:16, p. 15  
John 11:47, p. 13  
John 12:31, p. 14  
Acts 17:28, p. 31  
Romans 12:3, p. 24  
1 Corinthians 4:7, p. 33  
1 Corinthians 14:34, p. 22  
2 Corinthians 12:4, p. 2  
1 Timothy 2:11, p. 28  
II Peter 5:8, p. 14  
Titus 1:12

### **General References**

Abigail (David, 1 Samuel 25), p. 19  
Aguilar y Seijas, Rev. Francisco de (archbishop), fn, p. 29  
Ahasuerus, fn, p. 3  
Alcaic meter, p. 30  
Alfonso X el Sabio (king), fn, p. 22  
Ambrose (saint), p. 31  
Amigas (school), p. 5  
Apollo, fn, p. 20  
Apulia, Italy, fn, p. 31  
Aquinas, Thomas (saint), pp. 1, 9, 31  
Aratus, (Greek poet from Cilicia), fn, p. 31  
Arce (Doctor; Juan Díaz de Arce), pp. 22, 30  
Arenal, Electa, and Amanda Powell, *The Answer/La Respuesta*, fn, p. 10, fn. p. 13  
Arete of Cyrene, p. 20  
Argensola, Lupercio Leonardo de, p. 18  
Aristotle, fn p. 24  
Arius, p. 23  
Asbaje y Machuca, Pedro Manuel de, fn., p. 6  
Aspasia Miletia, p. 20  
Athena, p. 19  
Augustine (saint, Aurelius Augustinus), p. 24, fn. p. 31  
Augustine (saint), *Contra litteras Petiliani donatistae*, p. 33  
Augustus (emperor), fn, p. 34  
Aulus Gellius, p. 14  
Biblioteca Virtual Andalucía, fn, p. 28  
Birgitta Birgersdotter (St. Bridget of Sweden), p. 28  
Blesila (Blæsila, saint), p. 21  
Bonaventure (saint), p. 31  
Bridgittine monastic religious order of Augustinian canonesses, p. 28  
Canticle of Moses, p. 30  
*Caracol, el* (non-extant book by Sor Juana), fn, p. 8  
Carlos II (king of Spain), fn., p. 22

Cassiodorus, p. 31  
 Catherine of Alexandria (saint), p. 20  
 Cazalla (doctor, Agustín), p. 23  
 Clement of Alexandria, fn, p. 20  
 Convent of the Conception, Mexico City, p.30  
 Convento de Santa Paula, fn, p. 7  
 Cornelia, p. 20  
 Council of Nicaea, p. 23, fn, p. 26  
 Council of Trent, fn, p. 1  
 Countess of Paredes, p. 22  
 Countess of Villaumbrosa, p. 22  
 Cyprian (saint Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus), p. 29  
 Daniel (biblical book), p. 8  
 Daphne 2, p. 20  
 David (king), pp. 7, 30  
 Deborah (Judges 4-5), p. 19  
 Descartes, René, fn. p. 22  
 Discalced Carmelite order, fn, p. 12  
 Donatism (heresy), p. 24  
 Duchess of Aveyro (María Guadalupe de Alencastre y Cárdenas), p. 22  
 Elizabeth (John the Baptist's mother), p. 1  
 Epicurus, fn, p. 20  
*Epithalamia* (c.f., Song of Songs), p. 30  
 Epimenides, fn, p. 31  
*Eshet hayil* (Proverbs 31: 10-31), fn, p. 26  
 Esther, pp. 3, 19  
 Eusebius Pamphilus, p. 26  
 Eusebius Pamphilus, *Chronicle*, p. 30  
 Eustochium (Saint), p. 21  
 Fabiola (saint), p. 21  
 Fernández de Santa Cruz, Manuel (Bishop of Puebla), fn, p. 1  
 Filotea de la Cruz (Sor), fn, p. 12, fn, p. 19, fn, p. 35  
 Gertrude the Great (saint), pp. 21, 28  
 Gracián, Baltasar, *El criticón* (*The Critic*), p. 13  
 Gracián, Baltasar, *El discreto*, p. 17  
 Gregory XI (pope, saint), fn., p. 4, p. 32  
 Gregory of Nazianzus (saint), p. 31  
 Haman, fn, p. 3  
 Hannah, p. 19  
 Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), p. 30  
 Hypatia of Alexandria, p. 20  
 Ignatius of Loyola (saint), *Spiritual Exercises*, p. 28  
 Inquisition (Holy Office of the), p. 4  
 Isabel (I, queen, *la Católica*), p. 22  
 Isidro of Sevilla (Saint), fn, p. 19  
 Jerome (saint), fn, pp. 1, 4, 7, fn. 31

Jerome (saint), *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, fn, pp. 10, 30  
 Jesse (David's father), p. 13  
 Jesuits (Society of Jesus), p. 29  
 John Chrysostom (saint), p. 32  
 Jucia (or Julia or Julia Domna), p. 20  
 Lacedaemonia, fn, p. 27  
 Leonardo da Vinci, fn, p. 9  
 Leontion, p. 20  
 Luther (Martin), p.23  
 Kino, Eusebio Francisco, fn, p. 22  
 Kircher, Athanasius, *On the Magnet*, p. 9  
 Law (five books of the Pentateuch), p. 8  
 Lucan: Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, p. 20  
 Lucius Septimius Severus (emperor), fn, p. 20  
 Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince*, p. 12  
 Magen David, f.n. p. 17  
 Magnificat, p. 31  
 Magnus, Albertus, p. 1  
 Malia, p. 27  
 Marcella (Saint), pp. 25, 28  
 Maria Christina Alexandra (Countess Dohna), p. 22  
 María de Jesús (Sor), *La mística ciudad de Dios*, fn, p. 28  
 María de la Antigua (Sor), p. 28  
 María de la Antigua (Sor), *Desengaño de religiosos, y de almas que tratan de virtud*, fn, p. 28  
 Martha and Mary, p. 28  
 Martial (1: 319), p. 27  
 Mary (mother of Jesus, Holy Mary, saint), fn, p. 1, 34  
 Maxentius, fn, p. 21  
 Milan, fn, p. 31  
 Minerva, p. 19  
 Monica (saint, Augustine's mother), fn, p. 31  
 Moses, p. 12  
 Mount Taygetus, fn, p. 27  
 Nicostrata, p. 20  
 Nun of Ágreda is María Fernández Coronel (Abbess of Agreda; Sor María de Jesús), p. 28  
 Núñez, Fr. Antonio (Sor Juana's confessor), fn, p. 29  
 Núñez de Miranda, Antonio (Fr.), p. 5  
 Ovid, *Ars Amatoria; Metamorphoses*.  
 Ovid, *Epistolae ex Ponto*, fn, p. 34  
 Pacátula, p. 25  
 Panoayán (hacienda), fn, p. 6  
 Paul (saint), p. 22, fn, pp. 31, 33  
 Paula (saint), pp. 7, 21  
 Pelagianism (heresy), p. 24  
 Pelagius, p. 23  
 Pericles, fn, p. 20

Petrus Hispanus, fn, p. 28  
 Pharisees, p. 12  
 Pindar, fn, pp. 20, 30  
 Pliny (Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, Pliny the Younger), pp. 14, 29  
 Pola Argentaria, p. 20  
 Popocatepétl (volcano), fn, p. 6  
 Proba Falconia (Faltonia Betitia Proba), p. 22  
 Python, fn, p. 20  
 Pythonesses, p. 20  
 Queen of Sheba (I Kings: 10), p. 19  
 Quintilian, pp. 1, 14, 29  
 Rahab, p. 19  
 Regina Convent, Mexico City, p. 30  
 Ramírez de Santillana, Isabel, fn, p. 6  
 San Isidro (saint) (St. Isidore), p. 30, 31  
 San Miguel Nepantla, fn, p. 6  
 Sapphic meter (Sapho of Lesbos), p. 30  
 Saul (king), p. 7  
 Scholasticism, fn, p. 10  
 Scipio Africanus the Elder, fn, p. 20  
 Seal of Solomon, p. 17  
 Second Vatican Council, fn, p. 1  
 Seneca, pp. 4, 34  
 Sibyls, pp. 19, 30  
 Society of Jesus (i.e., the Jesuits), p. 29  
 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Dream*; (*el Sueño* or *Primero Sueño*), p. 31  
 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta atenagórica* (Letter Worthy of Athena), pp. 31, 34  
 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Exercises for the Incarnation; Offerings for the Sorrows*, p. 34  
*Summulae logicales*, p. 28  
 Teresa of Ávila (saint), pp. 12, 28  
 Tiresias, p. 20  
 Titus, fn, p. 31  
 Transfiguration (New Testament), p. 12  
 Tridentine Breviary, p. 9  
 University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Real y Pontificia  
 Universidad de México), p. 6  
 Valerian (Roman emperor), p. 29  
 Vieira (Antonio de Vieira), p. 3, fn 14, p. 19, 29  
 Violante of Aragón (queen), fn, p. 22  
 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, p. 27  
 Vivarium in Bruttium (Monastery of), p. 31  
 Vulgate bible, fn, p. 1  
 Xerxes I (king), fn, p. 3  
 Zacharias, fn, p. 1  
 Zenobia, p. 20  
 Zurbarán, Francisco de, fn, p. 21