Humility, Silence, and Femininity in Sor Juana’s
*La Respuesta*

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In seventeenth-century colonial Mexico, or New Spain, as it was then known, the Catholic Church was an immensely powerful institution. The Reformation of the previous century had shaken the Church to its core, and in Mexico, the Inquisition was an omnipresent threat to those inside and outside of the church. Yet for all of the ways the church served as a restrictive and repressive force, it was also the most fruitful space for intellectual activity, study, and discourse in Mexican society. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was one of the most prominent thinkers and poets to come out of New Spain in the seventeenth century, and has been a popular subject in the fields of Latin American and Feminist studies, especially since the late-twentieth century. Sor Juana serves as an excellent example of the parallel autonomy and restriction the church gave its members, especially women, in this era. In 1691, Sor Juana wrote *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (The Poet’s Answer to the Most Illustrious Sor Filotea de la Cruz), more commonly known as *La Respuesta* (The Answer). In it, Sor Juana defends the rights of qualified women to study and write, by utilizing rhetorical and epistolary norms and appealing to scholastic tradition. Sor Juana’s use of humility, silence and other ‘feminine’ qualities in *La Respuesta* not only served to make her work palatable to readers, but also makes substantial theological and philosophical points.

Juana Inés Ramírez y Asbaje was born in either 1648 or 1651 in Nepantla, Mexico. Juana was a *criollo*, or Mexican born person with Spanish parents, and was born out of wedlock. From a young age she was drawn to learning. When she was a child, she followed her older sister to lessons, and tricked the teacher into teaching her as well.¹ In the late-seventeenth century, very few options were available to women, and most were either married off or sent to convents to become nuns at a young age. Juana was resistant to the idea of marriage and drawn to the relative intellectual freedom of convent life. In 1667, she joined a convent and began to study science, theology and poetry, and write prolifically. In 1690, the Bishop of Puebla, Fernández de Santa Cruz, read Sor Juana’s critique of a sermon by Portuguese Jesuit preacher, António Viera, and published it under the title *Carta Athenagórica*.

(Letter Worthy of Athena). In the publication, the Bishop included a letter he had written under the pseudonym of a nun, Sor Filotea de la Cruz, in which he praised Sor Juana’s intelligence and writing ability, but criticized the ‘profane’ subjects of her poetry, and her ‘excessive’ study of the sciences. In 1691, Sor Juana wrote La Respuesta in response to these charges.²

There is no doubt that, as a woman, Sor Juana faced great pressure to temper her work and bring it in line with church’s ideas of femininity. However, the Mexican Inquisition did not pose an urgent threat to Sor Juana before she wrote La Respuesta. In general, lay people received far more severe treatment by the Inquisition than members of religious orders did.³ Most problems involving nuns were handled internally, within the church, which resulted in very few nuns ever being brought before the Inquisition, and even fewer being found guilty by it.⁴ In this period, most nuns did not see the Inquisition as a threat, but rather as an ally against the common enemy of heresy.⁵ Despite his veiled criticisms of her, by all accounts, Bishop Fernández was a friend and supporter of Sor Juana. His comments, as Sor Filotea, demonstrate his respect and admiration for Sor Juana as an intellectual. Before she wrote La Respuesta it does not seem that there was any immediate threat to Sor Juana’s safety, nor her intellectual autonomy.

La Respuesta cannot therefore be properly understood as a political writing, intended by Sor Juana to shield herself from the Inquisition, but rather as a defense of her intellectual work. As Amanda Powell writes, “rather than self-denunciation, [Sor Juana] is intent on self-defense: defense of her ideas as expressed in Carta Athenagórica, and defense of the study that led her to those ideas.”⁶ La Respuesta is philosophical and theological treatise that defends her right to study and does not back down from any of the points she made in Carta Athenagórica. Sor Juana’s use of humility, primarily at the beginning and end of La Respuesta, may be somewhat alienating to the

⁴ Ibid., 204.
⁵ Ibid., 195.
contemporary reader, as by today’s standards, it might be read as self-doubt or fear. Humility was in fact a very common trope in the period for many writers in the period, especially women. Situated in the historical and intellectual context it was written in, it is a nuanced and complex element of the work that serves not just to protect Sor Juana, but also her ideas.

Sor Juana was a highly unusual nun for her time, due to the overall rigor and breadth of her work and to her knowledge of mathematics, science, and Latin. The intellectual role of the nun in seventeenth-century New Spain was not typically one of intellectual agency, but rather one of submission and obedience towards male authorities. As the bishop writes in his letter to Sor Juana, learning in women is acceptable as long as it does not “take women from their position of obedience.” It is easy to see why, in this context, a free thinker like Sor Juana would feel restricted and be compelled to make a case for women’s intellectual capacity and right to study. In order to be taken seriously in a relatively rigid institution, it was imperative that she utilize the type of humility expected of nuns. The epistolary form was her genre of choice for most of her writing in prose, likely because it was a “frequent expository vehicle for religious women writing to their male superiors.” Stephanie Merrim has noted that Sor Juana writes “with a conventionalized ‘woman’s voice’ - employing a rhetoric of humility, submission and subordination.” The use of these techniques is necessary for Sor Juana to establish her credibility to a male audience.

Since the realities of her time meant that Sor Juana could not simply present her arguments as her own, much of her work involves exploring and analyzing the ideas of pre-existing theological authorities. This was part of the all theology in the scholastic tradition, but for a woman, it was even more important. In order to make a point, Sor Juana

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8 Sor Filotea de la Cruz, “Letter,” in La Respuesta, 225.
has to explain why her view is in line with that of her male intellectual “superiors.” Instead of obeying the expectations of her direct “superiors,” Sor Juana frequently overrides them in favour of higher authorities, such as respected scholastic theologians, scripture, and in some cases, God Himself. In the autobiographical section of La Respuesta, Sor Juana recounts a time when she was instructed by her Mother Superior not to read, and although she obeyed, she could not help herself and “studied all the things God created” outside of books.11 Studying for Sor Juana was not a choice she made in spite of her faith, but a natural compulsion that is demonstrated by her claim, “I study because I must.”12 If “all things come from God,” as Sor Juana believed, then her study was nothing more than obedience of Him.13

Sor Juana also appeals to the authority of theologians and other figures from Catholic history. One such authority is the apostle Paul, whose ideas were commonly used to argue against women’s scholarship and writing. Sor Juana addresses Paul’s famous words, “Let women keep silence in the church: for it is not permitted for them to speak,” by citing the prestigious theologian Dr. Arce’s interpretation of this quotation. Arce and Sor Juana argue that while the Pauline view suggests that public lecturing or preaching is inappropriate for women, “studying, writing, and teaching privately is not only permitted but most beneficial and useful to them.”14 Sor Juana claims that Paul’s warning “was meant not only for women, but for all those who are not very competent.”15 By directly addressing one of the most influential quotations opposing the education of, and study by, women, and referencing the view of a respected theologian, Sor Juana begins to deconstruct the hypocrisy of the Church’s view towards women.

Sor Juana lists a number of women from scripture and religious history in whom the Catholic community sees learning and wisdom as a virtue.16 In doing so, Sor Juana not only situates herself in the company of some of the most brilliant women in Christian history, she attacks the church for its arrogance towards some of the great figures of Catholicism. If the church respects the work of the great women that came before her, it is inconsistent for them to reject her work based on

11 Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 73.
12 Ibid., 77.
13 Ibid., 59.
14 Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 81.
15 Ibid., 83.
16 Ibid., 77-81.
her gender.¹⁷ Sor Juana is suggesting that, “adherence to custom – not to doctrine – has led to the criticisms and attacks against her theological document.”¹⁸ Her reframing of her desire to learn as God-given, and her appeal to the authority of respected theologians and scripture itself, allows her to argue her opinion, while still appearing humble and deferring to the wisdom of her male ‘superiors.’

Sor Juana’s appeal to religious authority is not just a demonstration of her own humility and credibility; it also serves as a criticism of the arrogance of her contemporaries. In Carta Athenagórica, Sor Juana criticized António Viera not just for the wrongness of his opinions, but also for his arrogant dismissal of the ideas of the theologians, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and John Chrystom.¹⁹ Sor Juana highlights the absurdity of framing Viera’s view as immune from criticism, writing, “is it bold of me to oppose Viera, yet not so for that Reverend Father to oppose the three holy Fathers of the Church?”²⁰ Sor Juana is challenging the egos of her male contemporaries and suggesting that they too must have humility towards the theologians that came before them.

Sor Juana recognizes that humility is expected of her and other nuns, and instead of allowing this to take away from her credibility, she uses humility to assert it. With Sor Filotea’s letter as a starting point, Sor Juana utilizes the fact that her superior is addressing her to justify taking such a bold stand. Early in La Respuesta, Sor Juana compares her position of presumed inferiority to that of Moses:

Moses, because he was a stutterer, thought himself unworthy to speak to Pharaoh. Yet later, finding himself greatly favored by God, he was so imbued with courage that not only did he speak to God Himself, but he dared to ask of Him the impossible: “Shew me thy face.” ²¹

In accordance with the rhetoric of humility, the Bishop’s mere recognition of Sor Juana gives her the credibility to speak her mind honestly. She recognizes that humility is not just a feminine virtue, but a

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¹⁹ Scott, “Sor Juana,” 513.
²⁰ Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 91-93.
²¹ Ibid., 43.
Christian one as well. Her criticism of the arrogance of Viera and her other male contemporaries is not an affirmation of a gendered power hierarchy, but a claim of her superior Christian credentials.

Contemporary scholars have described Sor Juana as a “proto-feminist”, not only for her defense of women’s intellectual capacities but for her legitimization of qualities that have traditionally been thought of as feminine.\(^\text{22}\) Obedience, humility, silence, and the connection of everyday practices to philosophy, can all be seen as manifestations of this. Julie Bokser has examined how Sor Juana takes what she calls “a gendered approach to rhetorical theory,” in which she makes no apparent effort to masculinize her voice, yet still demands to be taken seriously.\(^\text{23}\)\(^\text{24}\) As Bokser notes, Sor Juana’s “portrayal of the female intellectual is markedly different from the classical bodiless masculine mind.”\(^\text{25}\) The primary way in which this plays out in La Respuesta, is in Sor Juana’s intellectual growth and flourishing, and the way she links it to her physical body and to the everyday tasks and realities of her life. Sor Juana, from a very young age, “measures scholarly progress against bodily desire and growth.”\(^\text{26}\) This is seen in La Respuesta when she refuses to eat cheese for fear it will cause stupidity, and when she cuts her hair in order to motivate herself to learn.\(^\text{27}\) While for men mind-body dualism was taken for granted, Sor Juana connects her body to the process of her learning, and in this way, differentiates herself from her contemporaries. Sor Juana’s connection to her body does not serve as an impediment to her learning; it actually helps her in many cases.\(^\text{28}\)

Sor Juana reframes the practice of cooking, something seen as feminine and un-intellectual, as a philosophical practice. She observes the science of cooking and even suggests that it makes her more intellectually engaged. As she coyly remarks, “had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more.”\(^\text{29}\) Sor Juana distinguishes herself from male intellectuals by suggesting that her brilliance is not in spite of her gender, but in some ways, because of it.

\(\text{24}\) Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading,” 27-28.
\(\text{25}\) Bokser, “Sor Juana’s Rhetoric,” 12.
\(\text{26}\) Ibid.
\(\text{27}\) Sor Juana, *La Respuesta*, 49, 51.
\(\text{29}\) Sor Juana, *La Respuesta*, 75.
In the seventeenth-century Catholic Church, pain and suffering were very closely associated with the process of attaining knowledge and truth. Although physical pain was part of the material world typically associated with the feminine, the suffering of Christ resulted in the concept of a distinctly male type of pain and suffering. As Stephanie Kirk notes, “throughout history, society has attempted to gender knowledge as male,” and so, if suffering is part of knowledge, women’s suffering becomes considered a different sort so as to retain the conception of “the city of knowledge” as fundamentally male. Kirk writes, “Sor Juana responds to such exclusion by promoting physical torment as women’s way to cross the enemy lines of the patriarchy and gain access to knowledge.” While Sor Juana’s notion of the body is distinctly female, she subscribes to the Neo-Platonic notion of the sexless soul. In this way, Sor Juana overcomes the perception of the female experience of pain as inferior to the male, and defends the integrity of the feminine route to the neutral destination of knowledge.

In La Respuesta, Sor Juana explores the idea of silence, and muses on some of its limits and contradictions. She acknowledges that silence is not simply about a lack of communication or thought, and that, in many cases, to say nothing actually says quite a lot. In part, this is how Sor Juana justifies La Respuesta, by claiming that to stay silent would not serve the purpose of silence, which is to say nothing. When Sor Juana is emphasizing the enormity of her respect and humility towards Sor Filotea, she writes, “I shall thank you only by saying that I know not how to give thanks,” which illustrates the power she believes silence to have. Silence is not the absence of thoughts or ideas; it is the outcome of wanting to communicate, but lacking the linguistic capabilities to do so. In this sense, Sor Juana elevates the nun’s practice of silence to the most noble and complex form of worship, a response to that which is too powerful or good to be put into words. Sor Juana’s writing is rich and fruitful to contemporary feminists, not just because it is an explicit defense of

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading,” 22; Myers, “The Tenth Muse,” 98.
34 Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 41-43.
35 Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 43.
women’s intelligence, but because Sor Juana takes the oft-maligned qualities that were understood as feminine and gives them dignity and credibility. Sor Juana’s attempt to bring respect to these so-called feminine qualities is not unlike Carol Gilligan’s attempt in the 1980s to legitimize moral qualities that have historically been seen as feminine, and subjugated below ‘masculine’ moral qualities.

Many scholars have suggested that Sor Juana was influenced by the work of Plato. It is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.”38

Unlike the Athenian statesman and the craftsman he approaches, Socrates does not mistake conditional knowledge for true, absolute wisdom. Similarly, when Sor Juana claims, “I have studied many things but know nothing,” she is not putting herself down, but rather making a claim about the intangibility of knowledge, and the humility necessary to recognize what we can of the of the world. 39

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37 Lavrin, “Unlike Sor Juana,” 70.
39 Sor Juana, La Respuesta, 57.
Sor Juana’s *La Respuesta* is far more than a political self-defense from the Inquisition, it is a layered and nuanced work that exemplifies the depth and richness of her thought. Sor Juana’s use of humility and other “feminine” qualities, and her deconstruction of notions of women that prevailed in the seventeenth century, make her of continuing interest to feminist scholars. Her use of common rhetorical practices serve to make her arguments more palatable to her readers, and to criticize Viera and her other male contemporaries for their arrogance. *La Respuesta* is a letter from a humble nun, a proto-feminist manifesto, a rhetorical masterpiece, an epistemological treatise, an autobiographical ‘apology,’ and a theological criticism. Like Socrates, Sor Juana reminds her readers that often, all that study can teach you is that knowledge is elusive, and arrogance foolish. Sor Juana’s use of humility and other supposedly ‘feminine’ characteristics subtly asserts her credibility as a nun and, ultimately, her intellectual superiority over most of her contemporaries.
Bibliography


