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# Lo Peor Del Mundo: The Intellectual Legacy and Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

by

**Jacob Augustus Wintzell**

An Honors Capstone  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors Diploma  
to

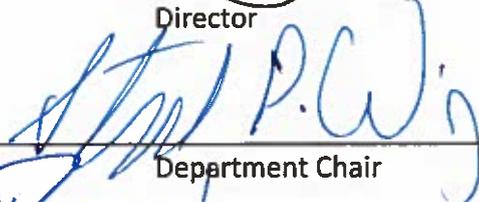
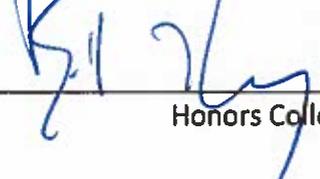
The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

March 07, 2019

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Introduction **7**

Part 1: “*The Things That Cannot Be Said: The Life of Sor Juana Within the Political and Social Context of Mexico*” **11**

Part 2: “*Letter of Athenaeum, La Carta, and La Respuesta: An Analysis of Sor Juana’s Clerical Critiques*” **17**

Part 3: “‘Hombres Necios’: An Analysis of Sor Juana’s Gender Critiques” **27**

Part 4: “No Books or No God: The Church’s ‘Triumph’ Over Sor Juana” **31**

Conclusion: “‘Try not to be another Sor Juana’: The Legacy of Sor Juana and Her Works” **34**

Bibliography **40**

## Illustrations

Illustration 1: *Retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* by Jorge Sánchez Hernández, **10**

Illustration 2: *Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* by Miguel Cabrera, **26**

Illustration 3: Miguel Cabrera, *The secret passion of Sor Juana*, **36**

Illustration 4: Yurihito Otsuki, *Sonnet of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, **36**

### Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this work to my four people. First, I would like to dedicate this essay to my best friend and one of the most intellectual endowed peers that I know, Ali Sultan. I have ever felt more blessed with any other relationship in my life. I would further like to dedicate this work to my closest professors, Dr. Sears and Dr. Pacino, both from the History department of the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Their guidance, expertise, and love for their students is unparalleled, and I truly have never grown more than when I have been in their presence. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my father. This work, in many ways, reflects the journey that he and I walked together as I grew into the prospective scholar that I am today. While I made it as difficult as possible, I always had my “number one” to lean on whenever I felt weary.

Thank you to all.

## Abstract

In this paper, I analyze select religious critiques of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz for their historical significance within the context of seventeenth century Spanish-Mexican societal and gender issues. I argue that an analysis of her works within the context of the time period in which she was writing shows a direct link between gender ideologies, the patriarchy, and the Catholic Church. One particular significance that I address in this text is the importance of contextualizing

Sor Juana's works within the seventeenth century society that she wrote. Only then can historians understand that Sor Juana was not attacking the institution of the Church as a whole, but rather critiquing the harsh gender norms that were improperly used when creating Catholic doctrine or interpreting scripture, which in Sor Juana's opinion significantly limited women's intellectual capabilities and the salvation of the masses in general. Thus, this paper also seeks to link the importance of the Catholic Church to the foundation of the Spanish colonial system and to show that Sor Juana's works not only address women's issues, but larger issues of the colonial system as a whole. What this analysis produces is a reevaluation of the way in which historians interpret, investigate, and write about Sor Juana's works and further challenges the negatively constructed identity that has marred the brilliant legacy of Sor Juana.

## Introduction

Karl Marx once claimed, “the bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.”<sup>1</sup> History provides various cases where women’s identity and nature were exploited on the basis of a presumed inferiority, which all too often produced contentious responses that were silenced by masculine doctrine. One of the best observations of such contention was seen in the life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. A beacon for women in Latin American history, Sor Juana tested the gender norms of seventeenth century Mexico by writing poetry and religious critiques that challenged patriarchal religious ideologies and practices. What was most important about these challenges was the way in which the leaders of the Catholic Church employed gender norms in order to solidify the patristic dominance within the religious sphere of Spain’s empire.<sup>2</sup> By observing the writings and life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as a case study, Sor Juana’s dialogue between her criticisms and the responses from many ecclesiastical and judicial leaders illustrated the interplay between Catholicism, gender norms, and the patriarchy in colonial Mexico. This link is important because it demonstrates the tools that the Catholic Church and the patriarchy utilized to defend their existing power-structures, it begins to clarify the complexity of structures that make up Latin American history, and it reaffirms Sor Juana’s legacy as one of the most influential philosophers and feminists of Mexican history.

This essay is structured in such a way as to provide the best approach to understanding Sor Juana’s works within the context of seventeenth century Mexico. Sor Juana’s intention,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, edited by Martin Puchner (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, 2005), 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 68-69.

above all else, was to combat the gender issues surrounding views of women's intellect.<sup>3</sup> While the importance and influence of her works certainly can be observed within the confines of the twenty-first century from both a national Mexican and international viewpoint, it is important to address the best method of analyzing Sor Juana's works, which is to contextualize her texts, grievances, and arguments within the confines of the same structures within which she found herself restricted within. By no means am I implying that the logic and arguments in her poetry, ballads, and letters cannot be applied to modern scenarios or ones outside of a Mexican contextualized story, but that caution by modern-day scholars needs to be observed when discussing both the life and legacy of Sor Juana. If not, a certain appropriation of her identity and her works might be the case, which leads to confusing definitions and understandings of her works.<sup>4</sup>

To prevent such a problem from appearing in my work, the essay is structured in a way that first provides definitions to key methodologies and historical institutions, how they came to be in seventeenth century Mexico, and how they provided a lasting effect on Mexican culture and identity. My first section deals with an introduction to Sor Juana's life as a character within the broader story of early colonial Mexico. After a proper foundation has been laid, my goal then is to discuss first her critiques of masculine ideals that tainted church doctrine, found primarily in

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Alvarez, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 32.

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Schons, "Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, found in Stephanie Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 45. In regard to appropriation, I am referring to the academic habit by Western scholars to misrepresent Sor Juana by analyzing her life based upon 21<sup>st</sup> century Western conceptions of gender equality, religious issues, etc. It is an idea that Sor Juana cannot represent herself, since her character of a woman is lesser than that of other women to her direct north because of Western constructs of what it means to be a woman. For a further analyzation of academic appropriation, a reading of Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," which I have sourced underneath my suggested reading list at the end of this paper, is necessary. A more accurate definition of Western and Western scholarship can be found in Al-Saji's "Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis," which is also referenced, on page 878.

her *Letter of Athenaeum* and her dialogue between prominent Catholic patriarchs. The next section will deal with a literary discussion of her poetry as a means of further illustrating how she articulated the problems of gender as a whole in seventeenth century Mexico. This multidisciplinary approach is necessary because a linguistic and literary approach to her poetry shows how she articulated her arguments. Finally, the last sections will discuss the end of her magnificent career, concluding with a scholarly discussion of her legacy and contextualizing her work within the confines of twenty-first century academic discourse. This section shows how proper application of historical study in the twenty-first century glorifies both her works and her life, removing much of the shadow that was cast upon her character.



Fig. 1. Jorge Sánchez Hernández, *Retrato de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. Circa 1750, Oil on canvas (Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec, México).

<sup>5</sup> <https://culturainquieta.com/es/lifestyle/item/12905-sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz-y-sus-intelectuales-recetas-de-cocina.html>

## ***The Things That Cannot Be Said: The Life of Sor Juana within the Political and Social Context of Mexico***

Juana Inés de Asbaje, or as history knows her, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was born in November or December of 1651 in Chimalhuacán, within the geographical boundaries of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. The most important detail about her early life was her passion for learning and education. Scholars today assert that Sor Juan was largely self-taught: “far from being a provincial autodidact, however, she had a prodigious intellect, a vast store of scriptural, theological, classical, and contemporary knowledge, immense skill as a writer in a broad range of genres...which she taught herself mostly.”<sup>6</sup> By the age of three she was able to read, and a few years later she learned Latin independently merely for pleasure. By the age of seven, she declared her life goal was to attend the University of Mexico, established in 1533, an entire century before Harvard University opened its doors. Of course, her declaration was met with intense scrutiny, as both her parents and the society around her disagreed with this juvenile decision. Seeking to remedy her situation, young Sor Juana begged her mother and suggested that she could dress as a boy, but soon found her desire of university scholarship impossible within the bounds of Mexican gender norms. However, she continued to feed her desire to learn and by the age of fifteen the Viceroy of her region, impressed by both her beauty and intellectual prowess, sent her to a panel of professors at the University of Mexico, who attempted, and failed, to humble her through an oral examination on a variety of fields of study.<sup>7</sup> When she turned sixteen years old, it was time for her to choose between marriage or life in a convent.

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<sup>6</sup> Alvarez, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, XVIII.

<sup>7</sup> John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, New York: W. W. Norton (2001), 68-69; Susan Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, New Jersey: Pearson Educaion Inc. (2004), 70-71.

To understand the implications of this decision, it is crucial to understand the context that many Mexican women experienced. As Dorothy Schons so artfully stated, “most of Juana’s biographers have examined this point in her life with the eyes of the present instead of with the eyes of the past. To understand Juana’s motives, one must go back to the period in which she lived, and study the social conditions of her time.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this latter point is essential, because to contextualize Sor Juana’s life within the many structures of seventeenth century Mexico helps illustrate the correlation between the themes of patriarchy, masculinity, and the church structure. Octavio Paz, whose 650-page work still remains the cornerstone of understanding her life and works, defended this position as well. Her work, while Paz argues is applicable still today, must be understood within the confines of the seventeenth century image of Mexico, for her audience, which she claims to be the “unidentifiable dread readers,” can be nothing other than the patriarchs of early Mexican society. Paz summarizes this position in his most famous quote:

Her dread readers are a part-and a significant part-of her work. Her work tells us something, but to understand that something we must realize that it is utterance surrounded by silence: the silence of the *things that cannot be said*. The things she cannot say are determined by the invisible presence of her dread readers. When we read Sor Juana, we must recognize the silence surrounding her words. That silence is not absence of meaning; on the contrary, what cannot be said is anything that touches not only the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church but also the ideas, interests, and passions of its princes and its Orders. Sor Juana’s words are written in the presence of a prohibition; that prohibition is embodied in an orthodoxy supported by a bureaucracy of prelates and judges. An understanding of Sor Juana’s work must include an understanding of the prohibitions her work confronts. Thus, her speech leads us to what cannot be said...<sup>9</sup>

What cannot be said was how the church and the patriarchy operated, the ideologies they put into motion, as the fuel for Sor Juana’s critiques. Thus, to understand her works, it must be understood how her society worked around her, for her critiques originate within the very specific context of

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<sup>8</sup> Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 40.

<sup>9</sup> Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988), 5-6.

Mexico. This does not imply that her logic can only be applied to seventeenth century Mexico, but it infers more the importance of her work's legacy on many of the modern institutions and mentalities that developed from original structures and ideas in Mexican history, which as Paz and Schon conclude, highlight the importance of contextualizing Sor Juana before studying her works.<sup>10</sup>

To begin, life in Mexico started far before the arrival of the Spanish. Since around 1200 B.C., Mexico was home to the Olmec people, whose population flourished until roughly 600 B.C. Following this civilization, one of the most famous people to typify early Mexican civilization were the illustrious Mayans, who thrived between 250 and 900 A.D. Notable as one of the most impressive civilizations in the world, they had developed a society far more advanced than that of smaller European peoples of this time period. The Mayans were skilled in the field of urban economics, science, and mathematics, producing a calendar and developing a sophisticated form of writing. With the Mayans is where many historians argue that the religious tradition of Mexico was born, with ceremonial sites and temples marking the center of many cities. Most notable was the fact that the Mayans carved important dates onto alters, recorded significant events, and wrote down much of their history in expansive forms of records.<sup>11</sup>

From civilizations such as the Maya, Mexican culture and societies flourished. However, in 1427, the greatest pre-Columbian Mexican civilization arose in central Mexico: the Aztecs. The Aztec society defied the splendor and tradition of even the greatest European territories and cities. Partnered with the remnants of the Mayan and Toltec civilizations, the Aztec empire grew to become a modern marvel by the mid-fifteenth century, with a population of five million

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<sup>10</sup> Schons, "Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 38-40.

<sup>11</sup> T. R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), see Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 8, 11-27; 82-101.

people divided into self-ruling states or units known as *calpulli*. Each *calpulli* had its own governing body, educational system, military force, and religious bureaucracy. Another notable aspect of the Aztec empire was the economic structure, which brought incalculable prosperity to the rulers and its people. While it is important to note that Mexico has not always been inherently Spanish, it was within this colorful, diverse, prosperous, and advanced society that the Spanish sought to colonize.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of Hernán Cortés in Veracruz in 1519, Mexico was influenced by a variety of gender norms linked to both the political and religious spheres of Spanish colonial society. By May of 1521, Cortés and his small forces, allied with the Tlaxcalans, conquered the Aztec empire, and established the colony of New Spain. During the next three consecutive centuries, Spain had direct control of Mexico and its people as one of its colonies, imposing a variety of social, political, and cultural customs and institutions on the indigenous Mexican people's traditions. As a new colony, Spain was able to import new traditions and institutions to the Mexican peoples, which gave Spanish officials the authority to restructure Mexican society to benefit their personal and national goals. Spain immediately set up a patriarchal bureaucracy that controlled much of Mexico using gender, class, and race as defining factors.

Focusing specifically on gender, patriarchal control redefined the limits of both men and women in Mexican society through imported gender norms based largely on those seen in Spain, which sought to restrict women's agency. Colonial leaders imported gender norms, such as machismo and marianismo (which will be discussed in further detail later in the essay) that essentially placed men and women in their "naturally" respective roles. In terms of power structures, this redefined two specific spheres in Mexican society to fit implicit gender ideology:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 167-171.

the public sphere, largely comprised of political and social leadership, was reserved for men, while the private sphere, otherwise known as the household or domestic sphere, was reserved for women. What existed previously in Mexican society were more communal-style systems of government and political structures and a gender ideology that gave women some form of autonomy and agency codified as a form of complementarity or gender parallelism.<sup>13</sup> This is by no means to say that gender norms and ideologies were not a significant factor of pre-Columbian Mexican society in reference to determining subordination or authority; however, it is important to note that gender became a substantial force of expressing political, religious, and, more generally, power structures. Furthermore, this essay does not ignore the specific class and race issues that explain power dynamics in colonial Mexican society, which played equally important roles in structuring the hierarchy of authority in sixteenth and seventeenth century Mexico, but in an effort to be concise and coherent, a strict analysis of gender ideology is necessary.

Gender became a major crux in rhetoric of conquest, which used morality to link religion and the Catholic Church as justification for colonial dominance. By 1523 Catholic missionaries began to arrive, solidifying Catholic authority by the early seventeenth century. Converting millions of indigenous people to Catholicism was no easy task and required the enforcement of strict gender guidelines and support from the patriarchal government. In the view of many Catholic leaders, the religious state of Mexico was “a most licentious age.”<sup>14</sup> Many contemporary academics label early colonial Mexican society as a society opposite to the ideals held by Christianity, with various critiques coming from the “abominable” condition that women lived in. Catholic leaders recorded that “more conditions in Mexico were very bad” and that without proper guidance, women in Mexican societies would surely fall into various

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., see Chapters 14 and 15, 181-212.

<sup>14</sup> Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 40.

temptations.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Catholic Church molded gender ideologies first implemented by colonial leaders into forms of religious rhetoric. Catholic leaders continued to balance the patriarchy and religious terminology so frequent in Spain, reinforcing the necessity of two separate spheres of gender influence (i.e. the public vs. private spheres). Modern scholars today argue that women were a major focus for colonial domination, whose roles were constantly structured within the grasp of the Catholic Church. One scholar stated that two major reasons exist in early Mexican history to justify this claim. First, the Catholic Church held a “medieval” attitude toward women, which were “looked upon as an ever present source of temptation to men.”<sup>16</sup> Temptation’s direct link to sin made women the primary targets of gender control in both religious and political realms, as both were essential to justify colonial rule. Women also belonged to the domestic sphere, which in Spanish society, was centered around machismo familialism and marriage. This codified women’s success and progress in colonial Mexico to two basic options: an ultimatum between a marriage to man or a marriage to God.<sup>17</sup> Other options were available to women depending also upon class and race, but for many women, such as Sor Juana, familial or religious subordination were the only safe options for subsistence.

A reclusive and secluded life in a nunnery was the alternative to marriage in Latin America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it provided valued time to study and write about many of her most pressing philosophical thoughts and questions. To Sor Juana, marriage was detestable and ruptured her focus on religious purity. With her “total declination to marriage” she was able to focus on building her understanding of faith and her approach to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Basham, “Machismo,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1976), 126; Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood*, 227-235.

religious texts upon which her obedience to God depended.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, having been denied the ability to study in a university setting, Sor Juana decided that the cloistered life of the convent could distract her from the temptations of learning. However, what she thought was a rigorous lifestyle on a path to becoming a nun actually provided her ample time to bolster her intellectual prowess. She brought substantial amounts of books to the convent with her and her daily schedule left her plenty of secluded time for her studies. Within the confines of the convent, she produced beautiful works of poetry, including “The Second Celestina”, “First Dream”, “Love is More Maze”, and “The Pawns of a House”. Apart from her literature, she wrote critiques of established Catholic religious practices in Mexico during the seventeenth century in works such as *The Scepter of Joseph* and *Protest of Faith*.<sup>19</sup> One of her most important writings, and the one that would begin to spark contention between her and the Church, was her discursive critique in her *Letter of Athenaeum*.

### ***Letter of Athenaeum, La Carta, and La Respuesta: An Analysis of Sor Juana’s Clerical Critiques***

Sor Juana de la Cruz’s *Letter of Athenaeum* was a profound work that challenged the veracity of certain religious doctrines of the church. The critique originated from a particular letter written on a sermon given by the Portuguese Bishop António Vieira on the intricacies of Jesus Christ’s character as a human being. Vieira attacked many of the church fathers, such as Aquinas, Augustín, and Chrysotom. He stated that these men had overstepped their boundaries as

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<sup>18</sup> Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 61-65; Sor Juana de la Cruz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Letter to Sor Filotea*, in *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History, Document 36*, Edited by Sandra Lauderdale Graham, Kenneth Moore, and William Taylor.

<sup>19</sup> Nuccetelli and Seay, *Latin American Philosophy*, 70-71; Elio Marquina, “New Orthodoxy of Wisdom Claimed by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Women’s Education and the Debate on *La Carta Antenagórica*,” *La Revista Literatura* 78, no. 156 (2016), 623-626.

church officials, and through their philosophical and theoretical works on the interpretations of the bible, had failed to understand that only faith could lead to proper discourse of the word. Influenced by her studies from the writings of both Saint Paul and Saint Jerome, Sor Juana critiqued the idea of dogmas and doctrines and argued that such ideas were products of human understanding and their interpretation, nothing more. Since so much of the Catholic faith was subject to fallible interpretations of the written word, which is infallible, the doctrines of the established church provided a very unsubstantiated foundation for religious belief, which prompted an intense response from Sor Juana.<sup>20</sup> In this critique, it was not her intention to dismantle the church or attack every patriarch, but rather to fight for a more accurate understanding of the word, such that all citizens of Mexico could equally enjoy the fruits of salvation. To Sor Juana, Viera wanted to end intellectual discourse with the church, which would actually hinder salvation and faith.<sup>21</sup>

Sor Juana de la Cruz wrote this letter not only out of a sense of duty to her religion, but to highlight the necessity of women's involvement with religious authority and decisions, which attacked the basic gender ideologies that solidified patriarchal power within the Catholic Church. Scholar Elio Vélez Marquina argued that the *Letter of Athenaeum* "represents a masterful attempt to build an alternative official discourse."<sup>22</sup> This letter challenged patristic-masculine dominance of religious understanding and attempted to give intellectual prominence to women within and outside of the bounds of religious teachings. Sor Juana tried to bridge a gap that would allow open discourse between both genders on important doctrines of the Catholic

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<sup>20</sup> Marquina, "New Orthodoxy of Wisdom Claimed by Sor Juana," 626-627. Sor Juana de la Cruz, *Obras Completas IV: Comedias, Sainetes y Prosa, La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*, in *Fondo de Cultura Económica*, edited by Alberto Salceda (1995).

<sup>21</sup> Schons, "Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 49.

<sup>22</sup> Marquina, "New Orthodoxy of Wisdom Claimed by Sor Juana," 623.

Church. Her intention was not to attack Christianity or the Catholic Church; rather, she attempted to use reason and new perspectives on verses to challenge masculine-dominated doctrine. She stated that “my judgement is not so severe a censor as to disapprove of the verses for which Your Majesty has found...so celebrated. I do not intend with this judgement that Your Mercy alter your natural inclinations by renouncing the Books, but rather that you better them by occasionally reading the book of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> To Sor Juana, a more accurate understanding of the bible removed gender subordination in both the religious sphere and the public, intellectual sphere. Her defense of theologians and critique of current doctrine was directed at Catholic leaders as a plea for allowing women to express their intellectual understanding of the biblical word to more accurately understand the bible on a gendered egalitarian level. To her, women had the right to challenge fallible doctrines of the Church, the same doctrines upon which *both* women’s and men’s faith and salvation depended. Eventually, however, the letter was published in 1690, and received intense scrutiny from religious figures of a higher status.<sup>24</sup>

Between 1690 and 1692, Sor Juana de la Cruz began a written correspondence with the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernandez de Santa Cruz, who at the time wrote underneath the name of “Sor Filotea.”<sup>25</sup> Fernandez was an avid admirer of Sor Juana’s work and noted her intellectual genius in all fields that she studied, initially encouraging her to continue her private studies and observations. He also understood the effect she was having in the ecclesiastical field, but after the publication of the *Letter of Athenaeum* he began to warn Sor Juana that aggressive intellectual pursuits could hinder her religiosity, a façade masked behind gendered rhetoric and

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<sup>23</sup> Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 50.

<sup>24</sup> Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 49-51; Marquina, “New Orthodoxy of Wisdom Claimed by Sor Juana,” 625-629.

<sup>25</sup> Sor Juana, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Letter to Sor Filotea*, edited by Sandra Graham, Kenneth Moore, and William Taylor.

ideals.<sup>26</sup> In a letter written in 1690, *La Carta*, he critiqued her thesis on Vieira's sermon and denounced her commitment to intellectual pursuits. Where Sor Juana deviated from positive intellectual pursuits was the "opposition of the 'vicio' of 'curiosidad'."<sup>27</sup> Here, Fernandez accused Sor Juana of the "vicio de curiosidad", literally meaning the "vice of curiosity", differentiating it from "estudiosidad", or studiousness.<sup>28</sup> Curiosity led to an unhealthy appetite for knowledge and a distraction from deepening one's faith, which ironically limited one's own understanding of intelligence. According to Fernandez, instead of directing her studies to something more useful and practical, such as broadening her faith and obedience to Christ, her intellectual pursuits were becoming a vice in her life. To Fernandez, religious understanding meant remaining faithful to the preexisting doctrines of the Church, untouched by harmful curiosity of the material world.

However, while Fernandez appealed to the Catholic Church's anxiety about using scientific approaches to explain religious downfalls, in reality he used this rhetoric as a pretense to appeal to the gender norm known as "marianismo." According to scholar Bron Ingoldsby, marianismo is an engrained gendered belief in Hispanic culture that "venerates feminine virtues such as purity and 'moral' strength" in coordination with necessary duties as both a respectful and knowledgeable mother and a pure and obedient wife.<sup>29</sup> Ingoldsby states that the combination of "inferiority and negative feelings" combined with the essential "superior behaviors" of males led to the production of marianismo as a gender necessity in the minds of many citizens of the

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<sup>26</sup> Nuccetelli and Seay, *Latin American Philosophy*, 70-71.

<sup>27</sup> Alice Brook, "'Las ciencias curiosas': Curiosity, Studiousness and the New Philosophy in *La Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz y La Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 94, no. 7 (2017), 699-703; Sor Juana, *Obras Completas IV: Comedias, Sainetes y Prosa, La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, *La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*.

<sup>29</sup> Bron Ingoldsby, "The Latin American Family: Familism vs. Machismo," *Journal of Comparative Studies* (1991), 58.

early Spanish-American empire.<sup>30</sup> Marianismo was linked directly to familism, which “placed the family ahead of individual interests and development” and the “woman as the caretaker of the family, which had responsibility, respectability, and identity based off of the gendered norm of marianismo.”<sup>31</sup> In the case of Mexico, marianismo was a social and gender control mechanism that solidified patriarchal dominance over society, culture, and in the case of Sor Juana, religion. Marianismo found its roots in religious symbolism and doctrine and was traditionally linked to Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary was the ideal woman, for she was a virgin, caring wife, and a strong mother. Along with holding a pure social standing, an ideal woman needed to demonstrate a religious belonging and a pious dedication to ecclesiastical law.<sup>32</sup> Thus, marianismo was a gendered norm solidified by a woman’s direct relationship to the Catholic Church’s teachings and symbolisms.

What exemplifies Fernandez’s use of marianismo is his focus on Sor Juana’s misuse of her intellectual capacity as a nun. Fernandez continued to condemn Sor Juana’s letter, repeating his accusations of curiosity later in *La Carta*. He stated that an increased focus on “ciencias curiosas” reflected a focus on “letras humanas” over “letras divinas”.<sup>33</sup> Essentially, Fernandez pleaded with Sor Juana, arguing that her focus on scientific, worldly studies affected how she understood and produced writings about moral philosophy. In *La Carta*, Fernandez distinguished “filosofía natural” and “filosofía moral”, the former being philosophical studies that deviated from written scripture and focused entirely on the thoughts of mankind alone.<sup>34</sup> He argued that Sor Juana’s critique of Bishop Vieira’s sermon was incorrect because it relied too much on

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<sup>30</sup> Ingoldsby, “The Latin American Family,” 59, 61-61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>32</sup> Nuccetelli and Seay, *Latin American Philosophy*, 85.

<sup>33</sup> Brook, “‘Las ciencias curiosas’,” 699-703. Ibid, *La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, *La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*.

sources from other fields outside of divine scripture, such as natural sciences that sought to understand the material world.

Curiosity and religiosity also clashed negatively, to Fernandez, because scientific curiosity sought to answer questions that humanity was not simply ordained to understand. However, the most important focus of Fernandez's letter was her attempt to answer the Church's most challenging questions, which he feared threatened the basic gender norms that solidified the power dynamics of seventeenth century Mexico.<sup>35</sup> To counter Sor Juana's main rhetorical points, Fernandez appealed to the fact that Sor Juana was attacking the basic foundations of religiosity. She did not look for inward guidance but relied on natural and worldly sciences that destroyed the piety of her work. This point was exemplified by Fernandez's allusions to various saintly figures and female matrons, such as Mary, mother of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> As mentioned previously, Mary exemplified ideal womanhood in both the home and the church. In reference to religion, Sor Juana did not embody the characteristics of marianismo established by characters such as Mary. Her intellectual pursuits were not pious, obedient, or virtuous. Instead, they were more sinful curiosities rather than religious studiousness.<sup>37</sup> In his separation of moral philosophy and natural philosophy, Fernandez alluded to the separation between Sor Juana's work, which defied the various religious aspects of marianismo and womanhood, and moral philosophy, which was the standard of thought that was accepted by Fernandez that provided no formal threat to Catholic doctrine, and subsequently patriarchal power.

His letter was met with an equally challenging response in 1691. In *La Respuesta a Señora Filotea por Sor Juana de la Cruz*, Sor Juana defended her intellectual curiosity against

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<sup>35</sup> Brook, "Las ciencias curiosas," 699-703.

<sup>36</sup> Brook, "Las ciencias curiosas," 699-703.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 699-703.

her superior with a witty story of her intellectual life, which challenged the gender norms used by Fernandez. Sor Juana summarizes this intellectual freedom early in her letter:

[E]ven my sleep was not free from this continued movement of my imagination, but rather my mind asleep labors even more freely and unfettered, discoursing and composing verses, examining with greater clarity and calm the day's offering images and occurrences, of which I could make a lengthy catalogue for you, and come reasoning and thoughts I have reached asleep better than awake...<sup>38</sup>

In her response, she recounts various anecdotes from her childhood as well as her life in the convent and noted important observations that subtly described her experimental method of observation and study. For example, she told a story from her childhood where she watched two girls play with a spinning top. As a child, she questioned the circular motion of the top and asked what natural force acted upon it to keep it moving away from the girl's hand. From these observations, she set up an experiment: she spun a top on flour and noticed that the top spun in a spiral, not a perfect circle. From this experiment, she determined that the hand was the force that allowed the top to spin, but that force diminished over time when friction existed. Her brilliance was also demonstrated in another story where she again used practical, observational experimentation within the walls of her convent. In a room, she observed an optical illusion of two walls, and was able to conclude that she has found a visual pyramid, very rarely seen in person even in modern times. Impressively, these stories in her response had a very profound effect on scientific research and philosophical understanding of her time.<sup>39</sup>

Scholars and modern day Latin American philosophical thinkers Susan Nuccetelli and Gary Seay argued that the overall point of these stories was simple: take away her books, her

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<sup>38</sup> Alice Brook, "'Las ciencias curiosas': Curiosity, Studiousness and the New Philosophy in *La Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz y La Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*." *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 94, no. 7 (2017), 699-703; Sor Juana, *Obras Completas IV: Comedias, Sainetes y Prosa, La Carta a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz por Sor Filotea*.

<sup>39</sup> Brook, "'Las ciencias curiosas'," 702-706; Sor Juana, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's Letter to Sor Filotea*, edited by Sandra Graham, Kenneth Moore, and William Taylor; Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay, *Latin American Philosophy*, 70-71.

writing utensils, or any material items of intellectual discourse, and Sor Juana could still learn from the smallest and even most obscure objects in the convent. Nuccetelli and Seay said that after the Catholic Church removed her books nothing “could stop her impulse toward reflection, and without texts to occupy her, she turned to the simple observation of everyday phenomena—while cooking, while conversing with her sisters in the order, and while watching children play with their toys.”<sup>40</sup> Electa Arenal confirms this point in her analysis of Sor Juana’s famous philosophical work, *El Sueño (First Dream)*, arguing that “enthusiastic about recombinations of old and new methods of inquiry that had led to the development of physics, mechanics, optics, astronomy, physiology, and medicine, she pondered them philosophically and made them central metaphors” in almost all of her subsequent work.<sup>41</sup> In *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana demonstrated that she was one of the first people ever, not just the first woman, to practice and apply what scientists call “empirical observation” to ordinary objects and conversations.<sup>42</sup>

However, the most astonishing detail about *La Respuesta* was that she not once denied Fernandez’s claims that she was wholly curious, and she defended the use of science as the source of her intellectual observations and understanding, describing its usefulness to education. To begin, she discussed how her experimental observations and her studies showed how curiosity could be positive. Throughout the letter, she showed how scientific curiosity kept bringing her back to her studies, as she was constantly in search of the answers to her most pressing questions. Her stories argued that with science and curiosity, students could develop new ways of learning and discover answers to questions about the material world that religion

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>41</sup> Electa Arenal, “Where Woman Is Creator of the World. Or, Sor Juana’s Discourses on Method, found in Stephanie Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 124.

<sup>42</sup> Susana Nuccetelli and Seay Gary, *Latin American Philosophy*, 71.

simply could not answer. Curiosity, to her, was defined as something more than beneficial, because it was “driven by her urge to constantly ask why- why the walls appear to slope, and the top keeps moving, and the eggs fry in butter but dissolve in syrup.”<sup>43</sup> To Sor Juana, there was absolutely “nothing I could see without reflecting upon it, nothing I could hear without pondering it, even to the most minute material things.”<sup>44</sup> At no point did she ever discourage connection from the material world, but repeatedly used examples of science’s applicability to understand everyday life. Where the Church’s focus on moral philosophy fell short almost every time to explain the daily occurrences of the natural world, science and curiosity provided the tool set and sometimes the answers to the Catholic Church’s major questions.<sup>45</sup> The importance of this letter was that she understood that attacking the Catholic Church and countering Fernandez’s points were futile. Instead, she focused on arguing that while academic pursuits were out of the realm of gender norms linked to marianismo, education was necessary because it provided questions to which the Church, and subsequently the patriarchy, had no real answer.

Faced with such a desperate situation as proving the necessity of women’s intellect, Sor Juana used a variety of historical and biblical examples in her response about how women’s education provided not only agency for an entire gender, but also was useful to societies in the past. She referenced both biblical characters and well-known secular leaders. She stated that, “I see a Deborah issuing laws, military and political as well... I see the exceedingly knowledgeable Queen of Sheeba, so learned she dares to test the wisdom of the wisest of men with riddles... I see so many and such significant women.”<sup>46</sup> Abigail, Esther, Hannah, Hebrews, Greeks, Spanish;

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<sup>43</sup> Brook, “‘Las ciencias curiosas,’” 702-706.

<sup>44</sup> Sor Juana, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Letter to Sor Filotea*, edited by Sandra Graham, Kenneth Moore, and William Taylor.

<sup>45</sup> Sor Juana, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Letter to Sor Filotea*.

<sup>46</sup> Sor Juana, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Letter to Sor Filotea*, edited by Sandra Graham, Kenneth Moore, and William Taylor.

Sor Juana referenced various cases in which women used their intellect to shape society around them, cases that were hard to ignore. These references not only denoted that she understood the dire need to defend women’s intellectual rights, but they illustrated great women who used reason to both solidify religious beliefs and further the economies, culture, education, and politics of their respective regions and civilizations.<sup>47</sup> These references also exemplified a counter to the overuse of Mary as the staple character for womanhood. These various examples helped Sor Juana illustrate the short-sightedness of the patriarchy within the church structure and provided other verifiable and saintly people that pursued educational courses like Sor Juana did, which led to a period of confused silence from Catholic leaders for months to come.



Fig. 2. Miguel Cabrera, *Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. 1750, Oil on Canvas (Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec, México).

<sup>47</sup> Brook, “Las ciencias curiosas,” 702-706.

## **“Hombres Necios”: An Analysis of Sor Juana’s Gender Critiques**

During a small period or relative correspondent silence, Sor Juana began to build upon her earlier critiques of the church and focused more on critiquing gender norms that she saw as unfit for an increasingly reasonable secular society. This shift from clerical to gender discussions highlights an important switch in mentality for Sor Juana. As Paz argues, she took pride in her religious services, and saw no need for women to quit working for the church. He states that the “Archbishops, the Inquisitor . . . all had as much influence on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as her own admirers.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, seventeenth century Mexico was the perfect time for women to involve themselves in the matters of reason and the church. The problem was not that the church itself was oppressive, but that the patriarchy dominated doctrine with masculine ideas that actually were perverse to spiritual growth in general. Julia Alvarez, one of Sor Juana’s most accomplished translators, argues that Sor Juana simply did not understand why Church could not recognize the error in their actions, their alliance to masculine principle, which produced “intolerable arrogance” that impeded “independence of thought.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, her attacks began to fight issues of gender outside the confines of ecclesiastical walls, mostly in form of poetry.

One of her most famous works titled “Hombres Necios” or “Foolish Men” critiques both the hypocrisy of the masculinity as mutually exclusive to many of the social issues in Mexico. This poem, a standard quatrain stanza with inconsistent rhyme, harkens back to the Baroque style of poetry that was the standard form of literature during this time. Baroque poetry consisted of implicit meanings that played off of traditional allusions and comical undertones.<sup>50</sup> Specifically dealing with Sor Juana’s poetry, she frequently critiqued rampant masculinity by using the

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<sup>48</sup> Paz, *Sor Juana*, 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> Alvarez, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, xviii-xix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi-xxiii.

feminine endings that differentiated sex in adjectives, verbs, and adverbs in the Spanish language. An example can be found within the first two stanzas:

Hombres necios que acusáis  
A la mujer, sin razón,  
Sin ver que sois lo ocasión  
De lo mismo que culpáis:

Si con ansia sin igual  
Solicitáis su desdén,  
Por qué queréis que obren bien  
Si las incitáis al mal?

O foolish men who accuse  
Women with so little cause,  
Not seeing you are the reason  
For the very thing you blame:

For if with unequalled longing  
You solicit their disdain,  
Why wish them to behave well  
When you urge them on to evil?<sup>51</sup>

These two stanzas show the gender switches that Sor Juana so commonly used in her poetry. The verbs “accuse” and “solicit” have a double-meaning when translated back into the original Spanish as “acusáis” and “solicitáis”. These two verbs are conjugated in the present indicative form, otherwise known as “vosotros”, which is the second person informal-plural conjugation using “you all” as its pronoun. Typically, in Spanish Baroque poetry, when referring to a group of men, it is more common to use the formal third person plural “Ustedes”, which translates as “you all” as well. By using vosotros here, Sor Juana intends to both subordinate men as men subordinate women and to create the image of the “mujer varonil” or the “manly woman”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Sor Juana, “Hombres Necios,” found in Julia Alvarez, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 33-36.

<sup>52</sup> Stephanie Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism,” found in Stephanie Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 25.

Throughout the remainder of the poem, Sor Juana refers to women using the same *vostros* tense that she uses for the men. In Spanish poetry, the *vostros* form of conjugation was always reserved for talking about a group of women, as *ustedes* functions for a group of men. For example, she states that “You all try to combat with your resistance” in the third stanza. This “you all” refers to women’s “*combatís*” (again, notice the *vosotros* form) or “combat” against rampant masculinity. Here, by using the same conjugation for both men and women, Sor Juana sought to subordinate men to the same level to which men subordinated women.<sup>53</sup> This also seeks to show the slim difference between men and women, as both are equal in linguistics, literature, and society in Sor Juana’s eyes. To ignore this fact, in the poet’s eyes, is to ignore a simple fact of nature. Thus, men that subordinate women actually fight against the natural equality between the sexes.

Her poem “Foolish Men” also combats issues of hypocrisy and cruelty, as the poet likens both these attributes to the characteristics of masculinity. On hypocrisy, Sor Juana writes:

Opinión ninguna gana.  
Pues la qué más se recata,  
Si no os admite, es ingrata  
Y si os admite, es liviana.

You think highly of no woman  
No matter how modest: if she  
Rejects you she is ungrateful,  
And if she accepts, unchaste.<sup>54</sup>

What Sor Juana seeks to accomplish here is to show that “love” in the seventeenth century sense was “cannibalized” by the earthly desires of masculinity.<sup>55</sup> This latter stanza points to the fact that men seek always a sexual scapegoat. If a woman rejected a man, her virginity could be at

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<sup>53</sup> Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism,” 25-26.

<sup>54</sup> Sor Juana, “Hombres Necios,” 34.

<sup>55</sup> Schons, “Some Obscure Points,” 45.

question or she could be viewed as ungrateful for the attention given to her. If a woman were to give herself to a man, either willingly or unwillingly, the fault would be placed on her, as she was a licentious woman or a woman of loose morals. Either way, women were subordinate to men and had no right over their own sexual desire, according to the poet. This stanza also demonstrates how masculinity produces sexual hypocrisy, as men were never responsible for their own sexual downfalls. It also critiques the Catholic belief that women were sources of sexual temptation, which again fell outside of the responsibility of men. Thus, masculinity was hypocritical when dealing with sexual desire and temptation, and by logical extension, the Church itself was hypocritical because of its influence by masculine gender norms. Furthermore, on cruelty, she states:

Siempre tan necios andáis  
Que con desigual nivel  
A una culpáis por cruel  
Y a otra por fácil culpáis.

Always foolish in yours actions,  
With a measure that is uneven  
You condemn one for being cruel,  
Another for being easy.<sup>56</sup>

Again, Sor Juana illustrates here that women are just objects of sexuality in the eyes of masculinity. Using the same logic, Sor Juana shows here how men are sexually cruel, and by implicit extension, so too is the Catholic Church, which employed masculine-dominated gender ideologies. The pure love between man and woman and between Jesus Christ and humanity was corrupted by the Catholic Church simply because its entire institution in Mexico was founded on patriarchal doctrine and masculine rhetoric. In either case, Sor Juana's poetry can be read as a

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<sup>56</sup> Sor Juana, "Hombres Necios," 35.

gender critique on Catholic Church, because it depended upon a masculine focus to understand scripture and establish doctrine.

This latter point is affirmed by various scholars today. Stephanie Merrim argues that her poem “incites us to cross parochial critical lines, tracing the continuity between So Juana’s religious and secular writings, between her prose, poetry, and theatre.”<sup>57</sup> It is important to observe why she switched between philosophical writings and letters to more poetic critiques. According to Georgiana Sabat-Rivers, her intention was to both “go easy on the church” and to reach a broader audience.<sup>58</sup> As discussed previously, Sor Juana had no intention of destroying the church. She wholeheartedly believed in salvation and the importance of work-based-faith. However, she understood that certain masculine principles dominated doctrine, which excluded spiritual growth and maturity under the guise of gender norms. What was left was an image of a cruel and hypocritical church. She thought, while her critiques in her letters and essays were wholly justified, it was time to take a subtler approach to her voicing such grievances.

### **No Books or No God: The Church’s “Triumph” Over Sor Juana**

As Sor Juana’s works became more popular, the Church sought after new methods to combat her growing critiques. Maintaining control over a large amount of land across a very large amount of water was a difficult task for patriarchal Spain. Religious and political hegemony were needed in order to maintain control over the people and the land. Seeing the benefits of a less violent approach to authority, political hegemony required a softer domination through steady implementation of socio-political ideologies and institutions. While marianismo

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<sup>57</sup> Merrim, “Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism,” 12-13; 24-25.

<sup>58</sup> Georgiana Sabat Rivers, “A Feminist Reading of Sor Juana’s *Dream*,” found in Stephanie Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 144-145.

remained a useful tool for the patriarchy in all aspects of colonial life, the most important driving ideology was known as machismo.<sup>59</sup> As discussed by scholar Richard Basham, machismo (loosely translated as “the cult of male”) was implemented in Latin America as early as the sixteenth century, when the church and the state began to solidify patriarchal dominance of the society of the American colonies.<sup>60</sup> Basham defines machismo as “a display of sexual prowess, zest for action; including verbal ‘action,’ daring, and above all, absolute self-confidence.”<sup>61</sup> Basham continues, “the macho is a man who knows more than he tells, who conquers women at his pleasure, who suffers no injustice without response, and who, above all, never evinces fear.”<sup>62</sup>

In this case, Basham argues that ideal Spanish manhood was linked to the concept of machismo, which was one of the major driving ideologies that strengthened the power structures between the church and the male/female genders of Latin American society. Among the most outstanding values is the aggressiveness of manhood, linked to masculinity, strength, and dominating physical presence, and “the submission of the woman to her husband.”<sup>63</sup> This latter point was the most interesting in the case of seventeenth century Mexico, as it was interpreted in various ways. According to Ingoldsby, the term “woman” remained stagnant within this phrase, referring solely to any person defined underneath the scope of the female gender. However, the term “husband” carried multiple meanings when referring to machismo’s applicability in economics, politics, society, and religion. In terms of politics, this phrase represented the relationship between the two genders within the domestic and public spheres, as men pertained

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Basham, “Machismo,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1976), 126.

<sup>60</sup> Basham, “Machismo,” 127-128.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

to political, community, and civic spheres of influence, and women pertained to more domestic communities, such as the home and hearth. With religion, it carried a double meaning, both connoting womanhood's inferiority to both God *and* the church, which was the earthly extension of the almighty.<sup>64</sup> What this meant for Sor Juana was that she was not only violating the norms of womanhood established by marianismo, but she was also directly challenging the ideology that drove the patriarchy to consolidate its power religiously. In the eyes of the church, to violate the laws and beliefs of doctrine was to challenge God himself, and by extent, the patriarchy's authority.

In terms of intellectual achievement, machismo was used in Mexico to keep high-achieving women, such as Sor Juana, in subservient roles by claiming that any woman's interest in science was unnatural and that their roles in either the convent or the home did not consist of intellectual discourse. The patriarchy could not afford to have women challenging what Sor Juana openly and logically called fallible doctrines. For example, she attacked beliefs on institutions such as prostitution, asking who really sinned more, "she who sins for pay, or he who pays for sin?"<sup>65</sup> In terms of machismo, which saw men both intellectually and physically superior to women, logical challenges such as these could not exist if Spain was going to retain control of their empire in the Americas. Specifically dealing with religion, the patriarchy's power rested upon both the domination of machismo and the implementation of marianismo. Sor Juana's emphasis on education was a direct threat to the power dynamics established by these gender ideologies that were important to the Catholic hegemony. Thus, starting in 1693, the Catholic Church began to issue threats to Sor Juana based on machismo, the ideal manhood, and

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<sup>64</sup> Ingoldsby, "The Latin American Family," 60-63.

<sup>65</sup> Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 68-69. JUANA "HOMBRES NECIOS"

marianismo, the ideal womanhood. Although these attacks initially failed, as exemplified by Fernandez's letter, it was only a matter of time before Sor Juana recanted.<sup>66</sup>

When she entered the convent at the age of sixteen, Sor Juana was already reluctant to study, as it might have become a distraction to her obligations as a nun. By the time her work became publicized in 1690, the Church repeatedly reminded her that women embodied religious morality, and to defy the Church (the central religious authority of the land), was to defy oneself and one's God. According to marianismo, as discussed above, women were to remain as symbols of virtue and divine morality, and deviation from that norm could greatly harm an entire nation. Torn between science and faith, the material world and the divine world of God, she relented in 1694, giving up her books and materials. A year later in 1695, she died in despair while taking care of her the sisters of her convent during an outbreak of a smallpox epidemic.<sup>67</sup> The Church made her feel as a disgrace to both womankind and to God, and she died declaring that she was "the worst in the world."<sup>68</sup>

### **"Try not to be another Sor Juana": The Legacy of Sor Juana and Her Works**

"Lo peor del mundo," or "worst in the world," is still a common saying today in many homes in Mexico. After Sor Juana recanted all of her works, the Church used her identity as a lesson to women, which still affects mentalities of twenty-first century women today. Scholar Julia Alaves affirms this position, stating that "current-day Mexico interprets Sor Juana's legacy largely based on the same historical instances that she was writing against."<sup>69</sup> Perceptions of her legacy today paint her as a defeated woman who incorrectly challenged both the church and the

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<sup>66</sup> Ingoldsby, "The Latin American Family," 64.

<sup>67</sup> Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 68-69; Sor Juana De la Cruz, *Poesía, Teatro, Pensamiento*, in *Espasa-Calpe*, edited by Georgina Sabat de Rivera (2004).

<sup>69</sup> Alvarez, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, x.

patriarchy, and threatened the very foundation upon which Mexican civilization grew upon. A common phrase in Mexican households confirms this account: “Don’t be another Sor Juana.”<sup>70</sup> This phrase is likened to “Curiosity killed the cat,” which is the same type of maxim Fernandez used against Sor Juana in his response. Indeed, as Alaves alludes, Sor Juana’s legacy was very much diminished by the Catholic Church that “defeated” her.<sup>71</sup> When she recanted, the Church made every opportunity to paint her as a defiant and insolent woman, who challenged the ultimate foundations of the church and society and failed because both God ordained it and women could not understand such institutions or doctrine. Representations of her, as seen in the image below, cast her in her most “proper” setting: in the home making food, providing for the family, and taking care of the needs of the domestic field of Spanish-Mexican society. It was not the woman’s place, this intellectual field. The woman’s place was in the home and hearth, or in the convents: a marriage to God or to man. Her defeat seemed as if was a confirmation of these gender norms.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., x-xi.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., xi-xv.



Fig. 3. Miguel Cabrera, *The secret passion of Sor Juana*. Oil on Canvas.



Fig. 4. Yurihito Otsuki, *Sonnet of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. 2016-2017 Acrylic and charcoal on linen canvas, current interpretation of Sor Juana made in San Lorenzo de el Escorial, Spain

However, recent work on Sor Juana's life relieves her image from such misconceptions. As scholar Stephanie Merrim argues, Sor Juana's legacy is nothing short of her title as the "First Feminist of America."<sup>72</sup> Merrim asks the question of whether or not Sor Juana would have been judged the way she was if she was a man, affirming the defensive position taken by both the patriarchy and the Catholic Church. In her essay, "Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," Merrim asks, "Was she persecuted for being an intellectual or for being a woman?"<sup>73</sup> Merrim's critiques raise serious questions about the context of the patriarchy at the time, as the Age of Reason became more prominent at the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, which began to fundamentally challenge the way in which the Catholic Church defined the limit of its very own doctrine. With this in mind, it raises the questions about the attacks on Sor Juana and her work, as she used similar logic to attack the church in many ways that Enlightenment thinkers attacked religion as a whole a century later. Octavio Paz agrees, stating that "if she had been a man, the Princes of the Church would not have persecuted her. Deeper than the incompatibility between secular and religious pursuits was the perceived contradiction between writing and being a woman."<sup>74</sup> In Paz's opinion, the balance between Juana's secular studies and her religious appointments were only inexcusable along the lines of her gender; she simply was a woman in seventeenth century Mexico, who should not represent herself because her moral compass as a woman would not allow her.

As one of his more original exclamations of Sor Juana's life, Paz asserted one of the most memorable and agreeable understandings of her life and legacy, that of the "Tenth Muse."<sup>75</sup> In

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<sup>72</sup> Merrim, "Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism," 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> Paz, *Sor Juana*, 607-608.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 605-609.

terms of immediate understanding, Paz's allusion is to the Nine Muses or goddesses that presided over the arts and sciences. They were both feared and uplifted, but their most memorable quality was that they represented a wealth-spring of intellectual inspiration. Using it as a cultural signifier in modern times, Paz not only alludes to her influence in seventeenth century Mexico but highlights the magnitude of her identity to women and academics alike in subsequent centuries, for she is an inspiration for all. Electa Arenal agrees with Paz's analysis of her life and argues that "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a person of astonishing conscience. Literarily, she turned the world upside-down and inside-out with such baroque aplomb that it had taken until the twentieth-century for us to rediscover the breadth of her art and the depth of her feminist epistemology. Scientifically, she turned the world right-side-up and outside-in with such empirical understanding of linguistic strategies that she became a sober and ironic herald of the Age of Reason."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, it is this quote that summarizes Sor Juana's legacy more than anything: as a woman of science, as the first feminist of the Latin America, and as quintessential thinker of the Age of Reason, not confined by geography or gender.

Sor Juana de la Cruz's legacy remembers her as one of the most influential thinkers of the late seventeenth century. Her intellectual discourse opened the eyes of many students and religious figures to the problems of the Catholic Church's doctrines. Her empirical observation methods that she described in *La Respuesta* were unprecedented at the time, as the letter became widely studied through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an important piece of the canon of philosophical thinking. One of the most important aspects of her educational life and her writings was that she proved that through access to education, women could find greater agency. The ability to understand the material world, how it worked, and how it corresponded

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<sup>76</sup> Arenal, "Where Woman Is Creator of the World," 124.

with nations and people could shape the way that societies were formed and governed. To most, she proved gender stereotypes wrong: she articulated and illustrated that women had the intellectual prowess to match and even challenge patriarchal authority in Mexico and around the world. Indeed, to the Spanish government and the Catholic Church, she was the worst woman in the world, because she was the best example of how women could shape and change it.

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