

Amy Woolam Echeverria

Women in Philosophy II

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326 years ago, on March 1, 1691, Sor Juana de la Cruz penned her *Reply* to Sor Filotea which has become a kind of treatise on the rights of women to education and freedom of expression. Complexly and subtly argued, Sor Juana, did what few in her position would dare to do which was to essentially admonish in return a superior in the religious hierarchy and society more broadly. Not only was she intellectually bold in her seemingly humble response but in essence, she admonishes in return “Sor Filothea” for her cowardly act of betrayal, who concealed in name, was in actuality the same bishop who had asked for her to write the critique of the sermon which caused public embarrassment to the new Archbishop and prompted Sor Filotea’s admonition. In this paper I will explore Sor Juana’s Response through the lens of Christian paradoxes of which there are many.

Sor Juana was born according to Church and civil law of the time, illegitimately of mixed race parents which made access to education and a life of privilege an unthinkable possibility. And yet, it was the very conditions of her birth which led to the only real future possible for her which was to enter the convent and religious life. However the road to the nunnery was not straight and narrow. On the contrary, despite being negated the traditional rights and privileges of legitimate children which would have included suitability for marriage and access to education Sor Juana’s path winded through the world of the wealthy Court. This included the secular pleasures and partaking’s of art, theater, music, intellectual dialogue. Eventually, however, her illegitimate identity landed her first as a novice in the Carmelite convent then later the less austere convent of St. Jeronimo. This could be seen as the first and one of many paradoxes of Sor Juana’s life. It was in her illegitimate birth that eventually lead her to being recognized as a legitimate daughter of God.

It was also the path which led her to discover what she described as her inclination to letters, this natural and God-given gift to intellectual pursuits of all kinds.¹ This inclination proved to be perhaps the greatest paradox of Sor Juana's life. On the one hand, her gifts in philosophy, theology, arts, and sciences is what brought her the attention and recognition of her religious and civil superiors. Contrastly, it was this very gift of intellectual excellence that led her to be silenced by the Church. This paradox culminated in the three-part drama.

First it was her critique of a Jesuit sermon which had been commissioned by her friend and bishop as a way to antagonize the Archbishop of Mexico City. The critique, published without her knowledge, gained so much attention that the bishop, under the pseudonym of Sor Filotea and guise of Sor Juana's superior, took the step to write a letter to Sor Juana admonishing her not so much for her writing per se, but rather her seemingly lack of focus on scripture. Sor Filotea writes, "I do not mean you to modify your natural predisposition by giving up books; I do mean that you should improve it by sometimes reading the book of Jesus Christ."² Finally, unable to keep her silence in the face of Sor Filotea's criticisms, Sor Juana writes a lengthy and multidimensional response which is qualified early on when she says, "...indeed, I had almost made up my mind to let silence be my answer. Yet, since silence is something negative, although it explains a great deal by its insistence on not explaining, some brief label is needed to enable one to understand what is intended to mean."³

In actuality, the *Response* reads much like a crescendo-ing symphony of ideas that moves quietly from humble pleadings of forgiveness for her inadequacies, to a more boisterous self-defense of her writings citing among other things, her natural inclination to letters, obedience to superiors, and the lack of access to proper academic study. On this last point for example she says, "What I might point out in

¹ Beggs, Donald, "Sor Juana's Feminism from Aristotle to Irigaray," in *Hypatia's Daughters*, Indiana University Press, 1996, p.115.

² *Admonishment: The Letter of Sor Philothea de la Cruz*. p. 201

³ *The Reply to Sor Philothea*. p. 207

self-justification is how severe a hardship it is to work not only without a teacher but also without fellow students with whom to compare notes and try out what has been studied. Instead I have nothing but a mute book as a teacher, an unfeeling inkwell as a fellow student..."⁴ Here we read Sor Juana's subversive capacity to make a commentary on the institutional discrimination of women in education by citing to her own limitations. Here we see a second paradox in Sor Juana's life which is that the more she cultivates her own voice what she describes as her "God implanted" gifts to intellectual growth which sheds a light on the biases of the Church the more she is pushed into the shadows of silence.

Throughout the *Response*, Sor Juana deftly relies on Scripture, points to prominent theologians and philosophers including men and women, and the interconnections between theology, philosophy, natural and physical sciences, mathematics, the arts and so on; all of which points to her threatening brilliance to a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Her ability to weave themes, styles, and subjects and ideas together in a way that creates a holistic approach to life and vision for the world speaks to what can be described as a feminine philosophy. According to Beggs, Sor Juana articulates two kinds of equality in which he says, "Sor Juana uses the Aristotelian-Thomist perspective to establish equality (attack patriarchy), but goes on to argue that sex differences have a basic relevance for equal social arrangements and opportunities."⁵ This dual feminism that Sor Juana articulates manages to both call for the equality of men and women on the basis of their shared humanity while at the same time acknowledging the uniqueness and value of gender differences so that men and women need not denounce their masculine and feminine qualities but rather celebrate and better integrate each into the other.

Finally, a third paradox we see in the life of Sor Juana is that the more her vow of obedience constrains her ability to study and write, it seems the greater her interior freedom expands. We get a

⁴ Ibid, p. 216-217.

⁵ Beggs, p. 117

taste of this in Begg's final lines when he says, "Together these contrasting perspectives did not quite create an instability, but allowed So Juana to a space of profoundly fecund silences into which, at the end of her life, she withdrew in ironic obedience."⁶ Sor Juana understands and embraces through her faith that Christian discipleship entails taking up, as Jesus did, one's own Cross. Sor Juana even alludes to this in her *Response* when she writes of Jesus' Passion saying, "...the sacred head of Christ and His divine brain were a storehouse of wisdom, and in the world it is not enough for a wise mind to be scorned; it must also be bruised and hurt. Let the head that is a treasure-house of wisdom expect no crowning other than the thorns!"⁷ By drawing Sor Filotea's attention to the Passion, she is sending a message to indicate that Sor Juana understands that she is being scorned for giving expression to God's will for her, and so she anticipates that punishment by Sor Filothea will follow.

In conclusion, Sor Juana was an extraordinary woman of her times. Stretching boundaries and borders of culture, religion, philosophy, politics to imagine a world in which women could participate as equals in the intellectual endeavor. It's true she became a pawn in a ecclesial political power struggle among Church hierarchy, but her surrender to silence should not be viewed as a defeat, but rather a resurrection of her voice in a new way such that we continue to be inspired by her story today. Her contributions to the world of philosophy take on a very contemporary tone in the way she articulates a double equality of men and women. Beggs credits Octavio Paz as describing, "her cosmos, unlike Dante's was infinite, and that her God, contrary to Aquinas's, was a primal power, not a personal presence."⁸ Is it any wonder that we're still reading of her today? Mindful that today is International Women's Day, it is a gift to count Sor Juana among the countless women on whose shoulders we stand.

⁶ Beggs, p. 123.

⁷ *Response*, p. 221.

⁸ Beggs, p.122.