

The Silent Protest

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Throughout the course of modern history, political and religious authoritarian structures have sought to maintain monopolistic control of ideological discourse by placing severe limitations on freedom of expression. Dissident writers have characteristically responded to formal censorship, however, through the adoption of new literary techniques that move beyond ideological limitations. An exemplary case of literary innovation in the presence of strict regulations is Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, who lived as a Mexican nun during the seventeenth century. Through a joint examination of Sister Juana's life and the broader historical context for her literary voice, this article will explore several techniques and ideas found in her letter *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (1691). In particular, Sister Juana uses the concept of silence in her written work to promote intellectual equality for women and create a thematic space in which multiple perspectives can be voiced.

I. Introduction

Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz arose as one of the predominant figures of the Spanish literary tradition in the late 17th century not simply for her writing ability, but also because of the tempestuous times in which she lived. From a very early age, she demonstrated an indomitable affinity for learning, a passion that would lead her to a troubled, controversial life. Due to the social constraints against women during the time in which she lived, both in New Spain and around the world, Sister Juana never enjoyed the opportunity to fully develop her immense intellectual capacity. The woman of this time period found herself limited to either the domestic sphere or to a religious role. Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz chose the latter of these two options, transforming this role of traditional complacency into an avenue of artistic and intellectual expression. She remains a heroic figure to women's movements around the world for her acts of dissent against these social constraints and her personal crusade against the status quo of the day. Sister Juana's preeminence in New Spanish society, along with her intellectual capabilities, led her to experience these limitations of women first hand; she then represented her angst and misgivings regarding this oppressive system through paradoxical and cautiously dissident writing.

Born Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez in 1648, this daughter of a Spanish soldier and a Mexican creole grew up in a small Mexican village with an intense desire to learn (Gerder 1999). In her *Respuesta a sor Filotea* (1691), Sister Juana recounts her childhood in detail, and how she went about procuring adequate education. This autobiographical account of her childhood depicts her intense desire for knowledge and how she broke several rules to begin her studies, providing an early example of resistance against policies with which she did not agree (Sábat-Rivers 1997, 9). For example, Juana deceived her first teacher in order to begin learning to read without parental consent for her studies. During adolescence, she continued to sidestep the rules in order to pursue her academic goals by sneaking into libraries and disguising her self as a boy at the university, reactions to the facts that her family banned her from their libraries while the government did not allow female students in the university. Evidently, from the very beginning Juana demonstrated a

willingness to infringe upon social rules established by both her family and the ruling class in order to pursue the path dictated by her personal desires and goals.

Perhaps the most paradoxical and controversial act of dissent in Sister Juana's life was her entrance into a convent in Mexico City in 1669. Her choice to dedicate herself to the work of a nun was not obligated by a lack of secular opportunities: she was already a well-known public figure in New Spain due to her friendship with the Marquis of Mancera, the Viceroy of the colony (Chang-Rodríguez 2004, 75). Given these types of social connections with the upper colonial classes and perhaps their peninsular counterparts in Spain, Juana had many possibilities for success in the affluent social echelon of the period. She decided to follow in the footsteps of many intelligent women who went before her, however, in wishing to study without the worries of typical married life. Any secular opportunity would have most certainly involved an arranged marriage. For this reason, Juana's entrance into the convent was yet another act of dissidence. While she certainly wished to devote herself to her faith in Christianity, her primary motive was to obtain solitude in which she could also dedicate herself to her studies. In her eyes, the isolation of the convent remained the only sanctuary where freedom to study could exist. However, historical realities of the epoch were changing the religious climate around the world in such a way that would invade and ultimately destroy the intellectual safe-haven provided by life in the convent.

When the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, Europe erupted into an intense religious battleground of conflicting religious and political views. In order to defend itself against the Protestant threat, the Catholic Church adopted a more conservative and less tolerant stance on many issues to preserve ecclesiastical authority and to crush the possibility of further dissent. At the Council of Trent, Rome and the Pope arose as the central authorities of an inflexible and autocratic religious regime (Di Mare 1994, 3). The conflict between The Reformation and the Catholic reaction, the Counterreformation, led to the Thirty Years War in the first half of the 17th century, a war which involved nearly all of the European powers. After the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which politically divided Europe along religious boundaries, the Catholic Church redoubled its efforts to maintain the absolute control of orthodoxy in regions remaining under its control.

The most important aspect of this reaffirmation of the Catholic Church's supreme religious authority was the return to the unconditional rule of religious dogmatism. After the struggles against the Reformation, especially the violence of the Thirty Years War, the Catholic Church no longer tolerated dissent against doctrine. The new tenet of Catholic authority was that it was "tradition which adequately interprets the divine message, not individual inspiration" (Di Mare 1994, 12).¹ However, dogmatism encountered the growing strength of another enemy during this time period: the secular knowledge of the Renaissance. The important figures of the Renaissance emphasized the value of experience and investigation in arriving to a true understanding of the world in place of blind belief in the dictates of tradition. Hence, the Church struggled against the university and these new secular ideas for control over the diffusion of knowledge (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 21). The Church resisted, and rejected the scientific, philosophical, and theoretical innovations of the Renaissance in order to protect its role as the sole source of knowledge and authority, a role that gave it absolute power over huge masses of the population.

Many scholars claim that Juana's place of birth, New Spain in the second half of the seventeenth century, limited her scholastic opportunities due to oppression both by the Spanish Imperial government and by the Catholic Church during the Counterreformation. These institutions certainly played a great part in creating the barriers faced by women intellectuals in the colonial sphere. Yet the contention that Sister Juana would have benefited greatly from Renaissance thought had she lived outside the Spanish sphere remains entirely unbelievable. Religious and political

¹ Author's translation: "la tradición la que interpreta adecuadamente el mensaje divino, no la inspiración individual"

beliefs in Protestant nations and colonies limited the social and intellectual opportunities for women to an equal, or perhaps even greater, extent. Unlike Catholic-dominated lands, most women in the Protestant world lacked even the possibility of the convent as a means for avoiding typical social expectations. While religious work in the convent greatly limited the possibility of time for studies, domestic obligations expected of women elsewhere altogether removed this prospect. Clearly, Sister Juana's limitations were not due to geography, but rather time period.

Within the context of this political and social environment, Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz entered the convent of Saint Jerome in Mexico City in 1669. While she chose the convent life for the opportunity of free study, she quickly realized that the renewed missionary spirit of the Counterreformation would obligate her to take up the work of the convent in this religious mobilization. However, instead of extinguishing her desire to learn, this lack of time did nothing but renew her thirst for knowledge (Paz 1982, 540-2). Consequently, the inner-conflict between religious responsibilities and personal goals became a major factor in Sister Juana's intellectual life. While she was able to pursue her ambitions to some degree, publishing secular works before and religious works after her entrance in the convent, she never reached a full realization of her academic potential. Aware of this problem, Sister Juana criticized the lack of a place where women could seek intellectual fulfillment, a position that would put her in direct opposition against the religious powers and status quo of the day.

Inequality between men and women greatly concerns Sister Juana in her writings, a theme that directly springs from her own history. These writings implicate that she can not reconcile the intellectual discrimination of the era, which gives men ample prospects for academic study while almost entirely neglecting the cultivation of the female mind. While some claim that Sister Juana was a revolutionary feminist for demonstrating such ideas during this time period, this argument is difficult to believe. Sister Juana undoubtedly desired an amplification of the educational and academic roles of women (Paz 1982, 537), but she wanted them in order to complement the roles of the religious system of the period by adding the abilities of women to those of men. She did not intend to revolutionize the religious intellectual system in order to liberate women. Instead of creating a separate feminine system, she attempted to create a place for herself within the masculine system. Sister Juana criticizes the arrogance and superiority of men (Sábat-Rivers 1997, 14), characteristics that lead them to exclude women from higher intellectual pursuits, in works such as the poem "Redondillas:"

You foolish men who accuse
The women of being without reason,
Without seeing that you are examples
Of that which you blame on others.

With unrivaled angst,
You show your disdain,
But how is it that you want them to work well,
If you incite them to evil?

In the opening stanzas of this poem, Sister Juana asks how men hope to obtain good service from women if they are not well-prepared and motivated. How can the Church, led by men, expect work of equal quality from nuns lacking equal rights and opportunities? Through this poem, Sister Juana calls the reader's attention to the inequality with which she must live. By stepping into the role of the poet, a traditionally masculine space, Sister Juana immediately assumes some level of equality with male intellectuals of the time period. However, she does not condemn these men, nor does she

attempt to remove them from the intellectual space. Instead, she attempts to incite them to change the system and to treat women more fairly, ultimately hoping for inclusion in this system rather than rejecting it entirely.

The didactic work representing the argumentative peak of Sister Juana's intellectual career is the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* [The Response to Sister Filotea] (1691), a letter that is directed in actuality to Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the bishop of Puebla, Mexico. In the letter, Sister Juana defends her desire and right to obtain knowledge (Trabulse 1995, 17-9). Below the surface exists a subtext in which Sister Juana argues that her talents should not be disregarded simply because she is a woman. To understand this subtext, it is extremely important to understand the events motivating Sister Juana to pen the letter. In 1690, she wrote the *Carta Atenagórica*, a theological work in which she questions a sermon given by a Portuguese Jesuit in 1648, Antonio Vieyra, concerning the love of God. Fernández de Santa Cruz published the work, but after intense criticism from the nobility of New Spain and the theological authorities of the colony, the bishop upbraided Sister Juana, implored her to terminate her profane studies, and accused her of deviation from ecclesiastical dogma (Chang Rodríguez 2004, 76).² On the other hand, it is highly probable that the mystics, a group espousing the belief that only feeling and emotion could lead to a true union with god, condemned her for believing that human intelligence can understand the mysteries of God (Di Mare 1994, 12). Sister Juana's beliefs did not fit into any field of thought, causing her to become the victim of censorship and criticism from everyone.

The real controversy behind this conflict is the fact that Sister Juana "attempt[ed] to enter in to the metropolitan, masculine, and secular discursive space" (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 33), and therefore threatened the social norms of the time period as well as religious orthodoxy.³ In the *Respuesta* (1691), Sister Juana leaves no doubt that she favors women's intellectual rights. She dedicates a great portion of the text to praising exemplary women that sought academic success, suggesting that "her admiration for those women [is] stronger than her fear of trespassing the limits of orthodoxy" (Paz 1982, 547).⁴ For example, Sister Juana eulogizes Hypatia, a pagan mathematician murdered by a group of Christian nuns in 415; Sister Juana praises Hypatia's martyrdom, not for Christian faith, but rather on the basis of intellectual philosophy. Furthermore, by writing in this fashion, Sister Juana openly dissented against orthodoxy and dogmatism by implying the Church's guilt for destroying such intellectual talent, a claim that, by inference, also applies to the martyrdom of her own intellectual abilities.

In guerrilla warfare, guerrilla fighters use their own weaknesses as strengths and exploit the strengths of the enemy as weaknesses. In the *Respuesta* (1691), Sister Juana utilizes to great effect the weakness bestowed upon her by society: silence. In her essay *Las tretas del débil* [The Strategies of the Weak] (1984), Josephina Ludmer summarizes the tactics utilized by Sister Juana to resist the social norms of her time period through her writing. First, the conflict over her earlier writing, the *Carta Atenagórica*, demonstrates the discord between the woman occupying a space and the institution that granted her that space (Ludmer 1984, 47). For instance, Sister Juana asserted that others forced her to write and to publish her work and then subsequently criticized her for doing as they demanded. This indicates that women only possess the roles and opportunities given them by the authority structure, in this case religious, and that this authority retains unchecked dominion over them. Any slight deviation from the wishes of the authority leads to punishment, leading Sister

² In the *Respuesta*, Sister Juana claims that she did not wish for the *Carta Atenagórica* to be published, saying that others (i.e. Fernández de Santa Cruz) forced her to publish it. This point is highly debatable, considering the fact that it would be odd for her to send a work she did not want to be read by others to a Bishop for his consideration. Nonetheless, what is certain is that Fernández de Santa Cruz approved the work for publishing and then accused her of writing against orthodoxy once he understood the intensely critical reaction of New Spain's theologians and religious authority figures.

³ Author's translation: "intenta entrar en el espacio discursivo metropolitano, masculino y secular"

⁴ Author's translation: "su admiración por esas mujeres [es] más fuerte que su temor a traspasar los límites de la ortodoxia"

Juana to argue that “knowing and saying...constitute warring factions for a woman; total simultaneity of these two actions breeds resistance and punishment” (Ludmer 1984, 48).⁵ With this quote, Sister Juana criticizes the fact that the social role of women demands the mutually exclusive nature of these actions and dictates that women with knowledge must remain silent while those who know little may speak.

Ironically, in the *Respuesta* (1691), Sister Juana manipulates this imposed silence, in written form, to propagate her thoughts regarding the state of women. She understands that “the public word is occupied by authority and violence: the other [space] is that which gives and leaves the word”⁶ (Ludmer 1984, 50), which is to say that she must direct her reader’s attention to an understanding of her thoughts without directly expressing those thoughts. Therefore, Sister Juana integrates silent conclusions among vocalized evidence. She explains her personal intellectual talents and passion for learning, but abandons the theme before proclaiming that all women deserve educational opportunities. She describes her interests in understanding the world through experimental investigation and observation, but never reaches the point of saying that the Church should end its reliance on dogmatic tradition and adopt the scientific method to explain and understand the world and natural phenomena. In place of direct declarations of her thoughts and criticisms, she constructs a current of thought from which the reader must extrapolate conclusions. Moreover, she openly admits this intention when she writes, “to be quiet is not to have nothing to say, but rather to not be able to fit within the methods of communication all that there is to say.”⁷ Sister Juana fills her lines of text with evidence while leaving the conclusions between the lines for her reader to discover. To Sister Juana, “silence constitutes her space of resistance against the power of others” (Ludmer 1984, 50).⁸ Sister Juana only implies her complaints against the system because this suggestive manner renders it impossible for anyone to censure what she does not say.

With this idea in mind, a sonnet of Sister Juana offers an interesting interpretation:

This that you gaze on, colorful deceit,
Art’s beauty and its skill exhibiting,
With syllogisms false of coloring
Is for the senses quite a crafty cheat;

This, in which flattery always discreet
Has tried to excuse the years so harrowing,
And of time all the rigors conquering,
Thus old age and oblivion to defeat,

Is but care’s artifice of vanity,
Is fragile flower that the winds distress,
Is futile ploy to counter destiny,

Is foolish and mistaken eagerness,
Is faded zeal, and as all can well see,
Is corpse, is dust, is shade, is nothingness.

⁵ Author’s translation: “saber y decir...constituyen campos enfrentados para una mujer; toda simultaneidad de esas dos acciones acarrea resistencia y castigo”

⁶ Author’s translation: “el decir público está ocupado por la autoridad y la violencia: el otro es el que da y quita la palabra”

⁷ Author’s translation: “el callar no es no haber qué decir, sino no haber en las voces lo mucho que hay qué decir.”

⁸ Author’s translation: “el silencio constituye su espacio de resistencia ante el poder de los otros”

When she refers to “this that you gaze on” at the beginning of the poem, the reader can interpret that the object to which she refers is the poem itself. Sister Juana’s poem is untrue because, according to the social norms of the time, it is impossible that a woman could create an organized and expressive poetic work. She sarcastically implies the poem’s deception is a product of its creator’s ambiguous, anachronistic role. Furthermore, Sister Juana’s writing is a false syllogism because she establishes multiple lines of reasoning, but never includes the corollary conclusion. She creates an “artifice of vanity” that is full of words, but cautiously void of affirmations. The poem “is corpse, is dust, is shade, is nothingness;” it is a silent protest in vocalized form. It is Sister Juana’s manner of saying much by not saying anything.

Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz used the limited opportunities and oppressive circumstances in which she found herself to create a strong message against tyrannical authoritarianism. She cleverly disguised her dissension in her writing, allowing her message of equality to survive until the present era. While a strict reading of her biography might lead to the belief that Sister Juana was assimilated by the religious authority structure of the day, her prose and poetry reveal that she subverted social, political, and religious limitations to voice her protest. This protest achieves universality through Sister Juana’s use of silence, a space which anyone may enter. She invites the reader to join her protest, to cry out against oppression and tyranny with her, and to fill the silence. While the authoritarian systems of her time period excluded all other perspectives and beliefs, Sister Juana created the opposite effect in her writing. Silence is not the absence of ideas or thought, but the opportunity to create an ideological dialogue with the reader. Sister Juana dissents by accomplishing what the authoritarian status quo could not: a space in which all can voice their beliefs and perspectives.

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