
Translating Violence: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *La Respuesta*¹

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Abstract

*Called the Tenth Muse of her times, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) is Mexico's finest Baroque Poet. Born of mixed parentage, she was a prodigy celebrated as much for her beauty as for her intellect that spanned the understanding of both the Old World and New World literature and philosophy. Most of her work was written in the Convent of Santa Paula of the Order of San Jeronimo which she entered voluntarily in order to pursue her studies. In addition to *La Respuesta*, she is also renowned for *Primero Sueño* and several other poems and theatrical works. Sor Juana wrote *La Respuesta* in March 1691. Referred to as the Prototype Feminist Manifesto, *La Respuesta* is remarkable for its defence of a woman's right to teach, study and engage herself in literary pursuits. In *La Respuesta* (as indeed in all her works), Sor Juana examines gender, racial and religion-based violence and counters it through subtle, elegant word games. I propose to examine this text that is truly Baroque in its shifting shadow play, and attempt to analyze how Sor Juana translates the ontological violence of a colonial patriarchal order into an elegant, powerful defence of women primarily in the New World.*

Introduction

One of the most well known portraits of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was painted by Miguel de la Cabrera in 1750, just a little over fifty years from Sor Juana's death. Even now, hundred years later, Sor Juana's face beguiles and intrigues the viewer just as much as it must have her contemporaries. Her eyes look at us with the confident gaze of a woman sure of herself. Set against the somber background of her convent cell library, it is Sor Juana's face that

becomes the radiant focus point. It unites the various elements of the portrait: the sensuous red cloth covering the table, the elegant hand half turning the pages of a book lying open on it, the other hand holding up a long rosary looped around her neck, an enormous medallion below her face depicting the chastisement of women into humility, the cross on the shoulder. Her serene, confident, beautiful face unites the discordant elements: sensuality and a nun's habit, a straight confident posture and the kneeling woman on the medallion, a nun sworn to prayers and humble obedience against tomes arguing the might of reason.

One cannot help compare this portrait to the fashionable equestrian portraits and statues of the noblemen of the same period. Instead of the horse we have a high-backed chair as the seat of power and control. Reins are replaced by loops of rosary indicating control over brute nature instead of over other beings. The hand on the sword is replaced by a hand on the book. Instead of vanquished humans on the battlefield, we have serried ranks of books indicating battles of a different kind.

Called the tenth muse of her times, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648 to 1695) is Mexico's finest baroque poet, credited by Octavio Paz to have written the first intellectual autobiography of the New World. A prodigy, she was famous for her beauty as well as for her intellect that spanned the study of both the Old and the New World's literature and philosophy. Most of her work was written in the convent of Santa Paula of the order of Saint Jerome, which she joined for reasons that are not very well known. In addition to *La Respuesta*, she is also renowned for *Primero Sueño*, *villancicos*, *loas* and sonnets.

In 1690, Sor Juana presented a paper for an academic gathering at her convent. In this paper, she praised the wisdom of a Portuguese Jesuit Father Antonio de Vieira, but sharply criticized his understanding of Christ's love for humanity in a sermon that he had preached in 1650 in Lisbon. Don Manuel Fernandez de Santa

Cruz y Sahagun, Bishop of Puebla asked Sor Juana to send him a copy of her presentation. The result was the *Athenagoric Letter*. Though it was meant for him alone, the Bishop published it at his own expense without Sor Juana's knowledge or permission. This publication was prefaced by one Sor Filotea, the feminine identity assumed by the Bishop. The preface asked Sor Juana to desist from committing heresy, stay away from secular studies, "to improve them by occasionally reading that of Jesus Christ" (xv) and submit herself to the humility required of a nun in Holy Matrimony with Christ. A friendly, sincere letter on the surface, it nonetheless dangles the sword of *Santa Oficio*, Inquisition over her head. Aware of the threat, Sor Juana adopts the same friendly, humble tone in her reply, *La Respuesta*, but uses devastating reason for arguments. Referred to as the Prototype Feminist Manifesto, *La Respuesta* is remarkable for its defense of a woman's rights to teach, study and engage herself in literary pursuits.

In this paper, I propose to analyze how Sor Juana with her characteristic baroque style engages with the violence ontogenic to her patriarchal, colonial society governed by an obsession about purity of race and religion. I propose to demonstrate how she translates a patriarchal command of submission to ecclesiastical authority into its opposite: an elegant, powerful defense of women in the New World.

Colonial Creole society of Mexico in the seventeenth century

The conquest of the Americas was a political and cultural conquest. It was a monolithic patriarchal order where the word of God translated itself into the 'righteous' sword. Both the conquistadores and the priests, who accompanied them, viewed the natives as an essentially barbaric race that needed to be 'civilized'. The ecclesiastical members had no problem distorting the word of God into an instrument of repression and death. They were reclaiming the barbaric lands and its peoples for the greater glory of the Church. The mechanism for maintaining the purity of race and

Catholicism (and its consequent superiority over the rest of humankind) that had served the monarchs so well in mainland Spain, functioned equally well in the New World. An essential violence was wrought upon the gentle tolerance preached by Jesus Christ. As in mainland Spain, His Gospel was translated into a doctrine of intolerance and violence which had disastrous consequences. Bypassing the poverty of the Franciscans, the Church owned vast tracts of land in the New World, its produce and unlike in Spain, the souls of those who worked on it. In an effort to maintain the purity of the race and religion, the *Santa Oficio* functioned as the religious watch dog. In the New World, its ruling was by the necessity of its agenda, harsher than on the mainland. Though by Sor Juana's time the obsession with building a spiritual empire on the converted souls of the Indians was being replaced by a growing Creole desire for its own *patria*, the repression was still severe. Sor Juana was up against this language of repression and death that the ecclesiastics had translated the Gospel into.

By the time Sor Juana joined the convent at the age of 19 years, the colony of Mexico had experienced a long phase of peace. War with local Indians was down to a few scattered insurgent attacks. Millenarian expectations were a thing of the past, but the *Santa Oficio* retained its oppressive control over the people. The creoles were engaged in the task of building up a civic life: cities with palaces, convents, churches and large residential areas were being consolidated. We get a picture of Mexico City in the closing decades and beginning of seventeenth century from Bernardo de Balbuena's *La Grandeza de Mexico*:

Spirited brave horses frisky and proud,
Houses with haughty facades in sumptuous streets,
A thousand riders light of hand and foot,
Sporting rich harnesses and costly liveries,
Embroidered with pearls, with gold, and precious stones,
Are common sights in our city squares

(Lafaye 1976: 52)

The seventeenth century witnessed the dawn of Creole identity. The creoles were now firmly entrenched in the colony. The Viceroy governed the colony in the name of the King. Thanks to a long period of relative stability, the colony was witnessing a surge in liberal arts. Convents were at the heart of this surge, open as they were to the influences of the world, though they did come into conflict with the *Santa Oficio* once in a while, as was the case with Sor Juana. Debates, poetry competitions and other literary pursuits were a common occurrence among them. Jacques Lafaye observes, “Humanistic culture, with its train of references to Hellenic polytheism, was a field cultivated indeed almost exclusively, by ecclesiastics (regular as well as secular clergy)” (ibid:53).

For a woman contemplating convent life, therefore, the task may not have been as daunting as it appears. Sor Juana herself was able to enjoy literary activities in the convent, and was able to transfer herself from the strict Carmelite convent where she found life too restrictive to the more lenient one of Santa Paula of the order of Saint Jerome to pursue her literary studies. Sor Juana was a natural child. Natural children of Creole parents were accepted to a degree in the society and there were restrictions on the levels they could rise to. Sor Juana herself never makes any reference to her father. Her status as a ‘natural child’ must have accorded her some very uncomfortable moments. In her poem *The Trials of a Noble House* she writes,

I was born of noble blood,
This was the first of fortune’s blows (241)

However, there is no doubt that this “first of fortune’s blows” allowed her access to learning and to a convent life where she was able to produce some of her best works.

Sor Juana’s religious life

Sor Juana’s life in the convent was not very different from the one she would have enjoyed in her grandfather’s house. Though we do not know exactly why she joined the convent, Sor Juana herself tells us she joined the convent for,

. . . notwithstanding that the spiritual exercises and company of a community were repugnant to the freedom and quiet I desired for my studious endeavors, . . . [and] given the total antipathy I felt for marriage, I deemed convent life the least unsuitable and the most honorable I could elect if I were to ensure my salvation.

(13, 17)

It must have been a bitter blow to realize that even centers of learning like convents faithfully followed the translated language of violence against its errant members, imposed more strictures and had the means to make her conform to the Community and its rules to turn her into the ideal nun: meek, submissive, devoted to the scriptures, abstaining from secular studies.

Both prior to and after joining the convent, Sor Juana had enjoyed the patronage and protection of two Viceroys: Don Antonio Sebastian de Toledo, Marquis de Mancera and his wife Leonor Carreto, and later of his successor, the Marquis de Laguna and his wife Maria Luisa. The recall of the Marquis de Laguna was of special significance. Juana had been celebrated at his court. There were also persistent rumors about a lesbian relationship between her and Maria Luisa. Inadvertently, Sor Juana became the site of a contest between the religious and secular powers. The church struck when the Marquis de Laguna was recalled to Spain. The *Athenagoric Letter* was published and Sor Juana was denounced for heresy. The injustice of it made her cry out,

In my pursuit world, why such diligence?
 What my offense, when I am thus inclined,
 Insuring elegance affect my mind,
 Not that my mind affect an elegance?

(171)

This was a dangerous period for Sor Juana. The Church had barely been able to tolerate her love sonnets and other secular works. Heresy was the last straw. Plus, her powerful protectors were no

longer around. The publication of the *Athenagoric Letter* was a double betrayal: of her confidence in the Bishop of Puebla and of her own sexuality. However, Sor Juana enters the charade and frames *La Respuesta* as a woman answering another woman. I believe she does so to be faithful to the context of the correspondence. Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Task of the Translator' says, "the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue." Sor Juana avoids this error by allowing the feminized masculine voice of the Bishop to frame her own feminine defense and expose the gentle face of the Gospel behind the language of control and chastisement. The result is a shifting mosaic of eloquent silences and utterances, of rhetoric and learning. Sor Juana herself planned it this way, though this intention is voiced not in *La Respuesta*, but hinted at in her *loa*, *The Divine Narcissus* that precedes *La Respuesta*:

. . . I shall give you
 a metaphor, an idea clad
 in rhetoric of many colors
 and fully visible to view,
 this I shall show you, now I know
 that you are given to imbue
 with meaning what is visible,
 it is now clear you value less
 what Faith conveys unto your ears,
 thus it is better you assess, see
 what you can see, and with your eyes
 accept the lessons she conveys.

(229-231)

The opening lines of *La Respuesta* stress her weakness, lack of wisdom and ability to answer "Your Reverence" Sor Filotea, in suitable terms. However, in the very next instance, Sor Juana quotes Saint Thomas to refer ironically to her intellect. *La Respuesta* abounds in instances in which Sor Juana affirms that "Christ [who]

goes not to rebuke but to work an act of mercy” (37), had been translated into an instrument of fear and control. This control was evident in the command of her Abbess who believed that “study was a thing of Inquisition, who [the Abbess] commanded me not to study” (39). Sor Juana translates the negative force of the Word of God making her stay away from studies both secular and religious into a force that “...willed that such an ungovernable force [her desire to study] be turned to letters and not to some other vice” (28). She states implicitly that those who commanded her to desist from studies had translated the Word of God to suit their own ends, to satisfy their craving for power. She bares the source language behind the mask of concern for well being and safety to what it really was: a more “civilized” translation of the envy the clergy felt at her success, of the panic and anger at the thought that she was escaping their rigid structure.

To support her argument, Sor Juana quotes “that politically barbaric law of Athens by which any person who excelled by cause of his natural gifts and virtues was exiled from his Republic ... Those reasons have been replaced by another ... which is to abhor one who excels, because he deprives others of this regard” [29].

The “clumsy” pen that can translate itself into erudite reason makes a powerful argument for secular learning and the importance of creating a space for it within the ecclesiastic structure for, as she says, “I studied all things that God had wrought reading in them, as in writing and in books, all the workings of the universe” (39). She argues that secular and religious studies cannot be translated as profane and sacred: for the eyes that can see, the profane world is but a translation of God’s sacred creative impulse. Studying it and its artifacts like secular texts is as devout an activity as studying religious texts for as the Bible says, in the beginning was the Word and later, that God looked at his creation and pronounced it good.

Sor Juana: The woman in a man’s church

In her *villancico Saint Catherine*, Sor Juana evokes the patron saint of the arts, Saint Catherine, to emphasize that men

should not try to limit the reason of women, for it had been granted to them by God himself.

There in Egypt all the sages
by a woman were convinced
that gender is not of the essence
in matters of intelligence
. . . None of these Wise Men was ashamed
when he found himself convinced,
because in being wise he knew
. . . it was of service to the Church
that women argue, tutor, learn,
for he who granted women reason
would not have them uninformed

(189-190)

Sor Juana believed that the Bishop of Puebla's response to the *Athenagoric Letter* was the result of a conscious distorted translation of the Scriptures manipulated by the patriarchal church to keep women, both religious and secular, in their place. The Church translated the courage and wisdom of women like Mary and Salome, of Mary Magdalene into a rhetoric that pronounced women as weak, emotionally unstable, vain and untamable beings who required religious rigors to transform them into creatures fit for rational society. A woman of intellect was an oddity and must be treated as such: either banished from the Republic or chastised into submission.

Sor Juana argues that Saint Paul's admonishment "Let women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted them to speak" had been translated into a rule that went against the will of God and keeps women mute, under control. Sor Juana argues that the Pauline ruling applies to

not only women who are held to be so inept but also men, who merely for being men believe they are wise, should be prohibited from interpreting the Sacred Word

if they are not learned and virtuous and of gentle and well inclined natures ...and that *keep silence* is intended not only for women but for *all incompetents.*”

(49-50)

Sor Juana accuses the patriarchal Church of deliberately manipulating the broad all encompassing nature of the Pauline ruling to include “all incompetents” to signify only women, for they being women *are* incompetent.

She writes,

I would want these interpreters and expositors of Saint Paul to explain to me how they interpret that scripture. Let women keep silence in the Church. For either they must understand it to refer to the material church . . . or to the spiritual, the community of the faithful, which is the Church. If they understand it to be the former . . . that if in fact it is not permitted of women to read publicly in church, nor preach, why do they censure those who study privately? And if they understand the latter . . . that not even in private are women to be permitted to write or study _ how are we to view the fact that the Church permitted a Gertrude, a Santa Teresa, a Santa Brigitta, the Nun of Agreda and so many others, to write? And if they say to me these women were saints . . . this poses no obstacle to my argument . . . because Saint Paul’s proposition is absolute, and encompasses all women not excepting saints . . . the Church allows women who are not saints to write, for the Nun of Agreda and Sor Maria de la Antigua are not canonized, yet their writings are circulated. And when Santa Teresa and others were writing, they were not as yet canonized.

(59)

What Sor Juana says here is as important as what she withholds. Silence itself becomes a language into which she

translates the persecution she feels she has been specially targeted when so many others like her had not been. It was her secular learning and works that were so threatening, not those of mystics like Santa Teresa de Avila, though even she had been accepted reluctantly in the beginning. Sor Juana argues that women have a right to teach the Divine Word in their own space, their hearths, if not publicly. Not only do they have the right, this right was supported by her own spiritual father Saint Jerome. She quotes from his letter *To Leta upon the Education of her daughter* where he instructs Leta on how she can initiate her daughter into religious studies: how a woman can instruct another in the private space of her own home. Sor Juana herself demonstrates how she found evidence of Divine Wisdom in her kitchen for instance. She laments, “. . . oh how much injury might have been avoided in our land if our aged women had been learned, as was Leta, and had they known how to instruct as directed by Saint Paul and my Father Saint Jerome” (53).

Sor Juana thus translated into powerful arguments through her ‘clumsy pen’ her belief that she was being persecuted not for the nature of her studies, but because she was excellent in them, because she could see through and efficiently counter patriarchal controls, because of the favor she had enjoyed under the two Viceroys, because of rumors of ‘unnatural’ relationship between her and Maria Luisa, because of her well argued critique of the powerful Jesuit de Vieyra’s sermon, because of her ‘natural’ birth. She criticizes the Bishop of Puebla for mis translating her intentions in public and thus misinforming people about what she was actually saying. Sor Juana comes straight to the bone of contention:

If the offense is to be found in the *Athenagoric Letter*, was that letter anything other than the simple expression of my feeling, written with the implicit permission of our Holy Mother Church? For if the Church in her most sacred authority, does not forbid it, why must others do so? That I proffered an opinion

contrary to that of de Vieyra was audacious, but, as a Father, was it not audacious that he speak against the three Holy Fathers of the Church? ... Is his opinion to be considered as a revelation, as a principle of the Holy Faith, that we must accept blindly? ...If as the censor says the letter is heretical, why does he not denounce it? ... I have not asked that he approve, as I was free to dissent from de Vieyra, so will anyone be free to oppose my opinion...

(62-63)

About the criticism levelled against her for her secular poetry she remarks, “and if the evil is attributed to the fact that a woman employs them [verses], we have seen how many have done so in praiseworthy fashion, what then is the evil in my being a woman?”(65).

Conclusion

This cry is at the center of Sor Juana’s life and works. The crisis of identity that it reflects is but one aspect of the larger baroque crisis. The crisis is complicated because it is refracted through the newly awakened Creole society, separated by an ocean from its parent identity. Sor Juana’s writings derive from and are translations of the Old World baroque. Her life, caught in the dualities of Spanish/Indian, nun/academician, is the source text that translated itself into a baroque feminist crisis of the said/unsaid, overt/implicit criticism, reason and fear. Sor Juana is conscious that she needs to bring these dualities to some degree of equivalence, to neutralize the power structure they imply without antagonizing her opponents further. The correspondence between Sor Filotea and her is a delicate waltz of hidden meanings led by a man to which Sor Juana adds her own arabesques. She does not unmask her partner – his mask helps her assume a more intimate relationship with him. The face behind the mask threatens, but it also helps her to demonstrate her intellect.

The dialogue that Sor Juana carries out with Sor Filotea is as much a dialogue with her own mirror self, with the doubts she needs to address about her own uneasy relationship between learning and asceticism: questions like who is she? A Creolla? A feminist? An academician or a nun? A disobedient headstrong woman or one standing up for what she believed in? Do these identities need to exist independent of each other, or can they be integrated into one? If so, what is the framework in which one can do it?

These questions are important because they lie at the heart of most of our probing into our own means of resolving our identity crises. They assume an added significance if we place them in the context of language. As a means of expressing these conflicts, language plays a central role. In *La Respuesta*, the two correspondents mask their own identities to present their arguments. This reveals the nature of language itself. How often does language succeed in unmasking its intention? As such, can languages be considered truly translatable? If they are, to what extent can one stay faithful to the unseen source language, or does it always become a personal, idiosyncratic approximation to the source language? What does this do to our own identities in relation to the “intended meaning?” In its baroque-ness, *La Respuesta* leaves one with these questions even as it testifies to Sor Juana’s courage to engage with them from her own precarious position in her world.

NOTES

1. All translations from Spanish to English of the original text have been taken from Margaret Sayers Peden. Transl. *Poems, Protest and a Dream: Selected Writings of Sor Inés de la Cruz*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997.

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