Reply to Sor Filotea

SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

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Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz

Translated from the Spanish with AI (Claude) and edited



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Reply to Sor Filotea · Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

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INTRODUCTION

In 1690 the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, printed, apparently without her knowledge, a critique that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun of the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City and the most celebrated poet in the Spanish-speaking world of her day, had written of a famous sermon. He gave it the title *Athenagoric Letter*, "worthy of Athena," and prefaced it with a letter of his own, signed with the pen name of a nun, "Sor Filotea de la Cruz." The letter praised her brilliance and gently told her to leave secular learning for sacred.

Her answer, dated March 1, 1691, is one of the great autobiographical documents of the 17th century. Under a surface of courtly humility, Sor Juana tells how she learned to read at three, begged to be sent to the university dressed as a boy, cut off her hair when she was slow to learn, and chose the convent as the life that would best let her go on studying. She argues, with a stream of examples from the Bible, the Church Fathers and history, that women may study and teach, and she shows how everything, even frying an egg, taught her something: "if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more."

This edition gives both letters in the text first printed in 1700, five years after her death, in the original spelling. The Latin quotations she weaves through her argument are translated in the English column. Margin numbers are paragraphs: F.1–F.9 for Sor Filotea's letter, 1–37 for the Reply.

Sor Filotea's Letter

Puebla, November 25, 1690
Writing as a nun, the bishop of Puebla praises Sor Juana's critique of a sermon and urges her to turn from secular study to sacred.

A BISHOP'S PRAISE AND COUNSEL

Writing as a nun, the bishop praises her critique of Vieira and urges her toward sacred study.

F.1 My lady. I have seen your letter in which you challenge the favors of Christ that the Reverend Father António Vieira reasoned out in the Maundy Thursday sermon. He did so with such subtlety that to the most erudite it has seemed that this singular talent, like another eagle of Ezekiel, had soared above itself, following the plan laid down earlier by the Most Illustrious César Meneses, one of the foremost minds of Portugal. But in my judgment, whoever reads your defense[1] will not be able to deny that you cut a finer pen than either of them, and that they might take pride in seeing themselves challenged by a woman who is the honor of her sex. I, at least, have admired the liveliness of your conceits, the discernment of your proofs, and the forceful clarity with which you prove your case. Clarity is the inseparable companion of wisdom. That is why the first word divine Wisdom spoke was "light": without clarity there is no

1 The writer is Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, bishop of Puebla, who signed as "Sor Filotea" and had Sor Juana's critique of the Portuguese Jesuit Vieira printed as the *Athenagoric Letter* ("worthy of Athena"). The debate concerned Christ's *finezas*, his acts of love, and which of them was his greatest proof of love.

word of wisdom.[2] Even Christ's word, when he spoke of the loftiest mysteries behind the veils of parables, was not held in wonder by the world. Only when he spoke plainly did he earn the acclaim of knowing all things. This is one of the many benefits you owe to God, for clarity is not acquired by labor and diligence; it is a gift infused with the soul.[3]

F.2 I have had this paper printed so that you may see yourself in a better hand. I have also done it so that you may recognize the treasures God placed in your soul and, understanding more, may be more grateful to him, for gratitude and understanding were always born twins. And if, as you say in your letter, whoever has received most from God is most obliged to repay him, I fear you may find yourself in arrears in the accounts, for few creatures owe His Majesty greater natural talents. So he presses your gratitude for payment. If until now you have used those talents well (as I must believe of one who professes such a religious life), from now on may you use them better.

F.3 My judgment is not so stern a censor that it finds fault with the verses for which you have been so celebrated, since St. Teresa, Gregory of Nazianzus and other saints canonized this skill with verses of their own. But I could wish that you imitated them in the choice of subjects as well as in meter. I do not approve of the vulgar opinion of those who condemn women's use of letters, since so many women applied themselves to this study, and not without praise from St. Jerome. It is true that St. Paul says women should not teach. But he does not command that women should not study in order to know, for he meant only to forestall the risk of pride in our sex, which is always prone to vanity.[4]

F.4 From Sarai divine Wisdom took away a letter, and it added one to Abraham's name. This was not because a man must have more letters than a woman, as many think. It was because the *i* added to Sara's name signified swelling and domination. Sarai is

2 Genesis 1:3, "Let there be light."
3 John 16:29–30: "Now you speak plainly... now we know that you know all things."
4 1 Timothy 2:12.

interpreted as *my lady*, and it was not fitting that she who held the office of a subject should be *lady* in Abraham's house. Letters that breed pride God does not want in a woman. But the Apostle does not condemn them when they do not take a woman out of the state of obedience.[5] It is well known to all that study and knowledge have kept you in the state of a subject, and have helped you perfect the refinements of obedience. Other nuns sacrifice their will through obedience, but you take your understanding captive, which is the hardest and most pleasing burnt offering that can be laid on the altars of religion.[6]

F.5 By this judgment I do not mean that you should change your bent by renouncing books, but that you should improve it by reading now and then the book of Jesus Christ. None of the Evangelists called Christ's genealogy a book except St. Matthew. The reason is that at his conversion the Lord did not wish to change Matthew's inclination, but to improve it. As a tax collector he had busied himself with the books of his dealings and interests; as an apostle he would improve his bent by exchanging the books of his ruin for the Book of Jesus Christ. You have spent a great deal of time[7] in the study of philosophers and poets. Now it would be right to perfect your occupations and improve your books. What people was ever more learned than the Egyptians? Among them the first letters of the world began, and hieroglyphics were admired. To praise the greatness of Joseph's wisdom, Holy Scripture calls him accomplished in the learning of the Egyptians. Even so, the Holy Spirit says openly that the Egyptians are an uncultivated people. All their wisdom, at most, penetrated the movements of the stars and the heavens, but it did not serve to curb the disorders of the passions. All their knowledge aimed at perfecting man in civil life, but it gave no light for attaining eternal life. And knowledge that gives no

5 Genesis 17:5, 15, where Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. The pun on *letras*, letters of the alphabet and learning, works in English too.

6 An echo of 2 Corinthians 10:5, "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

7 Matthew 1:1, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ."

light for salvation, God, who knows all things, judges to be folly.[8] So thought Justus Lipsius, that marvel of erudition. He was near death and the final reckoning, when the understanding is enlightened, and his friends consoled him with the many learned books he had written. Pointing to a crucifix, he said: *Knowledge that is not of the Crucified is folly, and mere vanity*.[9]

F.6 I do not, for all this, condemn the reading of these authors. But I tell you what Gerson advised: lend yourself to these studies, but do not sell yourself to them or let yourself be stolen away by them. Secular learning is a slave, and it often serves sacred letters well. But it must be condemned when it robs divine Wisdom of possession of the human understanding, making itself mistress when it was meant for servitude. It is commendable when the motive of curiosity, which is a vice, turns into studiousness, which is a virtue.[10] Angels flogged St. Jerome because he read Cicero as if dragged along, hardly free, and preferred the delight of his eloquence to the solidity of Holy Scripture. Yet this holy Doctor made praiseworthy use of what he knew of such authors and of the profane learning he acquired from them.[11]

F.7 You have spent no little time on these curious sciences. Pass on now, like the great Boethius, to the profitable ones, joining to the subtleties of natural philosophy the usefulness of a moral philosophy.[12] It is a pity that so great an understanding should stoop so low to the paltry knowledge of the earth that it has no wish to penetrate what happens in heaven. And since it does humble itself to the ground, it is a pity that it does not go lower still and consider what happens in hell. If at times it should enjoy sweet and tender reflections, let it turn to Mount

8 Acts 7:22 says this of Moses; the "uncultivated people" is Psalm 114:1 (Vulgate *de populo barbaro*).
9 Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), Flemish humanist and classical scholar.
10 Jean Gerson (1363–1429), theologian and chancellor of the University of Paris.
11 Jerome tells of the dream in which he was accused of being "a Ciceronian, not a Christian" in his Letter 22, to Eustochium.
12 Boethius (c. 480–524), Roman philosopher, author of *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

Calvary. There, seeing the favors of the Redeemer and the ingratitude of the redeemed, it will find a wide field for weighing the excesses of an infinite love, and for composing defenses, not without tears, against an ingratitude that reaches the utmost. Oh, how profitably would that rich galleon of your intelligence at other times sail out into the high sea of the divine perfections! I do not doubt that the same would happen to you as to Apelles. As he painted the portrait of Campaspe, Love's arrow made as many wounds in his heart as the lines his brush drew across the canvas. So at one and the same time the portrait was perfected and the painter's heart was mortally wounded with love for the original.[13]

F.8 I am very certain and sure that if, with the lively reasonings of your understanding, you were to form and paint an idea of the divine perfections (as far as is permitted amid the darkness of faith), your soul would at once be filled with light, and your will set on fire and sweetly wounded with love of your God. Then this Lord, who has rained such abundant positive benefits on you in the natural order, would not find himself obliged to grant you merely negative benefits in the supernatural order. However much your discernment[14] may call them favors, I hold them to be punishments. For the only true benefit is the one God does the human heart when he goes before it with his grace so that it may respond with gratitude. He disposes it with a benefit it acknowledges, so that divine generosity, no longer held back, may grant it greater ones. This is what is wished for you by one who, ever since kissing your hand many years ago, has lived in love with your soul. This love has not cooled through distance or time, for spiritual love suffers no ailments of change, and pure love admits no change except toward growth. May His Majesty hear my prayers, make you very holy, and keep you for me in all

13 Apelles, the Greek painter of the 4th century BC, fell in love with Campaspe, Alexander the Great's mistress, while painting her (Pliny, *Natural History* 35).
14 In the *Athenagoric Letter* Sor Juana had argued that God's greatest favors are "negative benefits," the gifts he withholds.

prosperity. From this Convent of the Most Holy Trinity of Puebla, November 25, 1690.[15]

F.9 Your affectionate servant, who kisses your hand, *Filotea de la Cruz*.[16]

15 The convent address keeps up the fiction that the writer is a nun.

16 The pseudonym means "lover of God"; Philothea is the addressee of Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

The Reply to Sor Filotea

Mexico City, March 1, 1691
Sor Juana tells the story of her life of study and defends the right of women to learn and to teach.

TWO IMPOSSIBILITIES

She cannot answer so learned a letter or thank her correspondent enough for printing her critique.

[1] Most Illustrious Lady, my Lady. It is not my will but my poor health and my well-founded fear that have held back my reply for so many days. Is that any wonder, when at the very first step my clumsy pen met two impossibilities to stumble over? The first, and for me the harshest, is knowing how to answer your most learned, most discerning, most holy and most loving letter.[1] Thomas Aquinas, the Angel of the Schools, was once asked why he kept silent before his teacher Albertus Magnus, and he replied *that he kept silent because he could say nothing worthy of Albertus*. If so, how much more reason would I have to keep silent? With me it is not humility, as it was with the saint; the reality is that I know nothing worthy of you. The second impossibility is knowing how to thank you for so excessive and so unexpected a favor as giving my scribblings to the press. It is a kindness so beyond measure that it would have outstripped even the most ambitious hope and the wildest desire. It could not have entered my thoughts even as a mere figment of reason.

1 Sor Juana keeps up the fiction of the signature: she writes to "Sor Filotea," the pen name under which Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, bishop of Puebla, had written to her.

In short, it is so great that it not only cannot be confined within the narrow limits of words, but exceeds the capacity of gratitude itself, as much by its greatness as by its unexpectedness. This is what Quintilian said: *They yield less glory to hope, and more to the benefit received.* Such favors leave the one who receives them speechless.[2]

[2] The mother of the Baptist was happily barren, so that she might be miraculously fruitful. When she saw in her house a visitor so far above her as the Mother of the Word, her understanding was dulled and her reasoning suspended, and so, instead of thanks, she broke out in doubts and questions: *And whence is this to me?* Where does such a thing come to me from? The same happened to Saul when he found himself chosen and anointed King of Israel: *Am I not a son of Jemini, of the least tribe of Israel, and my kindred among all of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken this word to me?*[3] So I will say: Whence, venerable lady, whence comes so great a favor to me? Am I anything more than a poor nun, the least creature in the world and the least worthy to occupy your attention? Then *why have you spoken this word to me? And whence is this to me?* To the first impossibility I have no other answer than that I am not in the least worthy of your eyes. To the second I have nothing but exclamations of wonder instead of thanks, and can only say that I am not capable of thanking you for the smallest part of what I owe you. This is not affected modesty, my lady, but the plain truth of my whole soul. When the letter you so aptly called *Athenagoric* reached my hands in print, I burst into tears of confusion, though tears do not come easily to me. It seemed to me that your favor was nothing but a reproach from God for how poorly I respond to him. As he corrects others with punishments, he wishes to bring me round by force of benefits. This is a special favor, and I know I am his debtor for it, as I am for countless others from his immense goodness. But it is also a special way of shaming and

2 Quintilian (c. AD 35–100), Roman teacher of rhetoric.
3 Elizabeth's words at the Visitation are from Luke 1:43; Saul's are from 1 Samuel 9:21.

confounding me, and a more exquisite way of punishing: to make me myself, with my own knowledge, the judge who sentences me and condemns my ingratitude.[4] And so, when I consider this here on my own, I often say: *Blessed be you, Lord, who not only did not wish to place my judgment in the hands of any other creature, nor even in my own, but reserved it to yours. You freed me from myself and from the sentence I would pass on myself, which, forced by my own knowledge of myself, could be nothing less than condemnation. You reserved it to your mercy, because you love me more than I can love myself.*

WHY SHE WRITES LITTLE ON SACRED SUBJECTS

She explains that fear of the Inquisition and reverence for Scripture, not dislike, have kept her from sacred topics.

[3] Forgive me, my lady, for the digression into which the force of truth carried me off. And if I am to confess the whole truth, it is also a way of looking for evasions to escape the difficulty of answering. I had almost decided to leave the matter to silence. But silence is a negative thing, and although it explains a great deal by the emphasis of not explaining, it needs some brief label so that what one means silence to say can be understood. Otherwise silence will say nothing, because that is its proper office: *to say nothing*. The sacred Vessel of Election was caught up to the third heaven, and having seen the hidden secrets of God, he says: *I heard the secrets of God, which it is not lawful for man to speak.* He does not say what he saw; but he says that he cannot say it. So things that cannot be said must at least be said to be *things that cannot be said*. That way it is understood that keeping silent is not having nothing to say, but that the great deal there is to say will not fit into words. St. John says[5] that if he were to write down all the wonders our Redeemer worked, the whole

4 "Athenagoric," that is, "worthy of Athena," was the title the bishop gave to her critique of António Vieira's Maundy Thursday sermon when he had it printed in 1690.

5 St. Paul, called a "vessel of election" in Acts 9:15; the passage is 2 Corinthians 12:2–4.

world could not hold the books. And Vieira says of this passage that in this one sentence the Evangelist said more than in everything else he wrote. And the Phoenix of Portugal speaks very well here (but when does he not speak well, even when he does not speak well?)[6] for here St. John says everything he left unsaid, and expresses what he left unexpressed. So I, my lady, will answer only that I do not know how to answer. I will thank you only by saying that I am not capable of thanking you. And as a brief label for what I leave to silence, I will say that only with the confidence of one who has been favored, and with the privileges of one who has been honored, do I dare speak to your greatness. If this is foolishness, forgive it, since foolishness is one of good fortune's treasures. In it I will supply more matter for your kindness, and you will give greater form to my gratitude.

[4] Moses, because he was slow of speech, did not think himself worthy to speak with Pharaoh. Yet afterward, finding himself so favored by God filled him with such courage that he not only spoke with God himself but dared to ask him for the impossible: *Show me your face.* It is the same with me, my lady: in view of how you favor me, the impossibilities I set down at the beginning no longer seem impossible. For the person who had the letter printed without my knowing anything of it, who gave it its title, who paid for it, who honored it so highly when it was wholly unworthy, both in itself and in its author—what will such a person not do? What will such a person not forgive? What will such a person leave undone?[7] And what will such a person leave unforgiven? So I take it that I speak under the safe-conduct of your favors and the security of your kindness. Like another Ahasuerus, you have given me the tip of the golden scepter of your affection to kiss, as a sign that you kindly grant me leave to speak and to make my case in your venerable presence. On that basis I say that I receive into my soul your most holy admoni-

6 John 21:25. António Vieira (1608–1697), Portuguese Jesuit preacher, whose Maundy Thursday sermon her Athenagoric Letter had criticized.
7 Exodus 4:10 and 33:18.

tion to apply my study to sacred books. Though it comes dressed as advice, for me it will have the substance of a command. And it is no small comfort to me that my obedience seems to have anticipated your pastoral suggestion even before it came, as if under your direction, as can be inferred from the subject and the arguments of that very letter.[8] I am well aware that your most prudent warning is not aimed at that letter, but at the many writings on secular subjects of mine that you will have seen. So what I have said is only meant to make amends to you, by means of that letter, for the lack of application you will have inferred, and with good reason, from my other writings. To speak more specifically, I confess to you, with the candor I owe you and with the truth and clarity that are always natural and habitual in me, that if I have not written much on sacred subjects, it has not been from dislike, nor from lack of application. It has been from an excess of fear, and of the reverence owed to those sacred letters, which I know I am so incapable of understanding and so unworthy of handling. Always ringing in my ears, with no small horror, is the Lord's threat and prohibition to sinners like me: *Why do you declare my justices, and take my covenant in your mouth?*[9]

5 There is this question. And there is the fact that even learned men were forbidden to read the Song of Songs until they were past thirty, and even Genesis: Genesis because of its obscurity, and the Song lest imprudent youth take occasion from the sweetness of those wedding songs to turn their meaning into carnal feelings. My great father St. Jerome confirms it, ordering that this be the last thing studied, for the same reason: *Let her learn the Song of Songs last, without danger; lest, if she reads it at the beginning and does not understand the wedding song of spiritual marriage beneath its carnal words, she be wounded.* And Seneca says: *In tender years faith is not clear.*[10] How then would I

8 Ahasuerus held out his golden scepter to Esther as a sign that she might approach and speak (Esther 5:2).
9 Psalm 50:16 (49:16 in the Vulgate).
10 Jerome, Letter 107, on the education of a girl. He was the patron of her order; her convent in Mexico City was San Jerónimo.

dare take this into my unworthy hands, when my sex, my age and above all my way of life stand against it? And so I confess that this fear has often taken the pen out of my hand and driven my subjects back into the very understanding from which they were trying to spring. I did not meet this obstacle with profane subjects, since a heresy against art is punished not by the Holy Office but by the discerning with laughter and by critics with censure;[11] and censure, *just or unjust, is not to be feared*, since it still lets one take communion and hear Mass. So it causes me little or no concern. For according to the very verdict of those who malign it, I have neither the obligation to know nor the aptitude to get things right. Therefore, if I get it wrong, it is neither a fault nor a discredit. It is not a fault, because I have no obligation; it is not a discredit, because I have no possibility of getting it right, and *no one is bound to do the impossible*. And in truth, I have never written except under pressure and compulsion, and only to please others, not only without satisfaction but with positive reluctance. I have never judged that I have the store of learning and wit that a writer's duty requires. So my usual answer to those who press me, especially on a sacred subject, is this: What understanding do I have? What study? What materials? What knowledge for that? Nothing but a few superficial smatterings. Leave that to those who understand it. I want no trouble with the Holy Office, for I am ignorant, and I tremble at the thought of uttering some ill-sounding proposition or twisting the genuine meaning of some passage. I do not study in order to write, still less to teach, which in me would be boundless pride, but only to see whether by studying I may be less ignorant. That is how I answer, and that is what I feel.

[6] Writing has never been my own choice but the compulsion of others; I could truly say to them: *You have compelled me.* What is true, and I will not deny it, is this. I will not deny it, first because everyone knows it, and second because, even if it tells against me, God has granted me the mercy of a very great love of truth. From the moment the first light of reason dawned on

11 The Holy Office: the Inquisition, which judged matters of doctrine.

me, my inclination to letters was so vehement and powerful that neither the reprimands of others (and I have had many) nor my own reflections (and I have made not a few) have been enough to make me stop following this natural impulse that God placed in me.[12] His Majesty knows why and for what purpose. And he knows that I have asked him to put out the light of my understanding, leaving only enough to keep his law, since anything more is superfluous in a woman, according to some; and there are even those who say it does harm. His Majesty also knows that, when I did not succeed in this, I tried to bury my understanding along with my name and to sacrifice it only to the One who gave it to me. He knows that no other motive brought me into religious life, even though the exercises and company of a community were at odds with the freedom and quiet that my studious purpose required. And afterward, once I was there, the Lord knows, and in the world only the one who alone was meant to know it knows, what I attempted in order to hide my name. And he would not allow it, saying it was a temptation. And perhaps it was.[13] If I could repay you any part of what I owe you, my lady, I believe I could repay it only by telling you this, for it has never passed my lips except to the one to whom it had to be told. By throwing the doors of my heart wide open to you and laying bare its most sealed secrets, I want you to see that my trust in you is equal to what I owe your venerable person and your excessive favors.

A CHILD WHO WANTED TO LEARN

She learns to read at three, begs to attend the university, and cuts her hair to study.

7 To continue the story of my inclination, which I want you to know in full: I was not yet three years old when my mother sent one of my sisters, older than I, to learn to read at one of the schools they call *Amigas*. Affection and mischief led me to follow

12 2 Corinthians 12:11.

13 Usually taken to be her confessor, the Jesuit Antonio Núñez de Miranda.

her. When I saw her being given lessons, I was so fired with the desire to know how to read that, deceiving the teacher (or so I thought), I told her *that my mother had ordered her to give me lessons*. She did not believe it, because it was not believable; but to humor the joke, she gave me lessons.[14] I kept going, and she kept teaching me, no longer in jest, because experience had undeceived her. I learned to read so quickly that I already knew how by the time my mother found out. The teacher had kept it from her so as to give her the pleasure all at once and receive her reward in one lump. And I kept quiet about it, thinking I would be whipped for having done it without permission. The woman who taught me is still alive, God keep her, and can bear witness to it. I remember that in those days, although I had the sweet tooth usual at that age, I abstained from eating *cheese*, because I had heard that it made people dull-witted. The desire to know was stronger in me than the desire to eat, powerful as that is in children. Later, when I was about six or seven and already knew how to read and write, along with all the other skills of needlework and sewing that women learn, I heard that in Mexico City there was a university, and schools where the sciences were studied. No sooner had I heard it than I began to plague my mother to death with insistent, importunate pleas to change my clothes and send me to Mexico City, to the house of some relatives she had there, so that I could study and attend the university.[15] She would not do it, and she was quite right. But I satisfied my desire by reading a great many different books that my grandfather owned, and neither punishments nor reprimands were enough to stop me. So when I came to Mexico City, people marveled not so much at my intelligence as at my memory and the knowledge I had at an age when it seemed I had scarcely had time to learn to speak. I began to learn Latin grammar, and I believe I took fewer than twenty lessons. My application was so

14 *Amigas*: small private schools kept by women, where little girls learned to read, pray and sew.

15 "Changing my clothes": that is, dressing her as a boy, since women could not attend the university.

intense that, although in women, and especially in the very flower of youth, the natural adornment of hair is so highly prized, I would cut off four or six finger-widths of it. I measured how far it had reached before and set myself a rule: if, by the time it grew back to that point, I did not know such and such a thing that I had set myself to learn while it grew, I would cut it off again as a penalty for my dullness. And so it happened that the hair grew and I did not yet know what I had set myself, because the hair grew quickly and I learned slowly; and I did indeed cut it off, as a penalty for my dullness. For it did not seem right to me that a head so bare of knowledge, which was the more desirable adornment, should be dressed in hair. I became a nun because, although I knew that this state had many things repugnant to my temperament (I speak of the incidental things, not the essential ones), nevertheless, given my total aversion to marriage, it was the least unsuitable and most fitting choice I could make for the security I desired for my salvation. To this first consideration, as the most important end, all the little whims of my temperament gave way and bowed their necks: wanting to live alone, wanting no obligatory occupation that would hamper the freedom of my study, and no bustle of a community to disturb the peaceful silence of my books. These things made me waver somewhat in my decision, until learned people made me see that it was a temptation. I overcame it with divine help and took the state I so unworthily hold. I thought I was fleeing from myself; but, wretch that I am, I brought myself along with me! And I brought my greatest enemy in this inclination, which I cannot tell whether Heaven gave me as a gift or as a punishment. For when it was smothered or hampered by all the exercises that religious life involves, it exploded like gunpowder, and the saying *privation is the cause of appetite* proved true in me.

STUDYING WITHOUT A TEACHER

She climbs through logic, rhetoric, music and the other sciences toward theology, with only books to guide her.

[8] I returned (I misspoke, for I never stopped)—I went on, I mean, with the studious task of reading and more reading, studying and more studying, with no teacher but the books themselves. For me this task was rest, in all the hours left over from my duties. Anyone can see how hard it is to study from those soulless characters, without the living voice and explanation of a teacher. Yet I bore all this labor with great pleasure, for love of learning. Oh, if it had been for love of God, which would have been the right thing, how much merit I would have earned! True, I tried to raise it as high as I could and direct it to his service, because the goal I aspired to was the study of theology. It seemed to me a feeble incapacity, being a Catholic, not to know everything about the divine mysteries that can be attained in this life by natural means. And it seemed to me that, being a nun and not a laywoman, I ought by my ecclesiastical state to profess learning. All the more so as the daughter of a St. Jerome and a St. Paula, since it would be a falling-off from such learned parents for the daughter to be unlettered.[16] This is what I proposed to myself, and it seemed reasonable to me. Unless, that is (and this is more likely the truth), I was flattering and applauding my own inclination by presenting its own pleasure to it as an obligation. With this I went on, always directing the steps of my study, as I have said, toward the summit of sacred theology. To reach it, it seemed necessary to me to climb the steps of the human sciences and arts. For how will anyone understand the style of the queen of the sciences who does not yet know the style of her handmaids?

[9] Without logic, how would I know the general and particular methods in which Holy Scripture is written? Without rhetoric,

16 St. Paula (347–404), Jerome's disciple, founded religious houses with him in Bethlehem; the Hieronymites looked to both as founders.

how would I understand its figures, tropes and turns of phrase? Without physics, how would I understand so many natural questions about the natures of the animals used in the sacrifices? So many things are symbolized in them, some already explained and many others still remaining. How would I know whether Saul's healing at the sound of David's harp came from the natural virtue and power of music, or from a supernatural power that God chose to place in David?[17] Without arithmetic, how could one understand so many computations of years, days, months and hours, and of weeks as mysterious as those of Daniel and others? To understand them one must know the natures, correspondences and properties of numbers. Without geometry, how could one measure the holy Ark of the Covenant and the holy city of Jerusalem? Their mysterious measurements form a cube in all its dimensions, with that marvelous proportional distribution of all its parts.[18] Without architecture, how would one understand the great Temple of Solomon? God himself was its maker, who gave its arrangement and plan, and the wise king was only the overseer who carried it out. In it there was no base without a mystery, no column without a symbol, no cornice without an allusion, no architrave without a meaning, and so with its other parts. Not even the smallest fillet was there only for the service and completion of the art; each symbolized greater things. Without a great knowledge of the rules and parts of which history consists, how will the historical books be understood? How will one understand those recapitulations in which the narrative often places later what in fact happened first? Without great knowledge of both laws, how can the books of law be understood? Without great erudition, how can one understand so many matters of secular history that Holy Scripture mentions? So many customs of the Gentiles? So many rites? So many ways of speaking? Without many rules and much reading of the Holy Fathers, how can the obscure language of the

17 1 Samuel 16:23.

18 Daniel 9:24–27 (the "seventy weeks"); Revelation 21:16, where the heavenly Jerusalem is measured as a cube.

Prophets be understood? And without being very expert in music, how will one understand the musical proportions, and their refinements, found in so many passages?[19] This is especially true of the petitions Abraham made to God for the cities, asking whether he would spare them if there were fifty righteous men. From this number he came down to forty-five, which is the *sesquinonal* proportion, like the interval from *mi* to *re*. From there he came down to forty, which is the *sesquioctaval*, like the interval from *re* to *mi*. From there to thirty, which is the *sesquitertian*, the proportion of the *diatessaron*. From there to twenty, which is the *sesquialteral* proportion, that of the *diapente*. From there to ten, which is the *duple*, the *diapason*. And since there are no more harmonic proportions, he went no further.[20] How, then, could this be understood without music? There in the Book of Job, God says to him: *Can you join together the shining stars, the Pleiades, or can you scatter the circuit of Arcturus? Do you bring forth the morning star in its season, and make the evening star rise over the children of the earth?* Without knowledge of astronomy it will be impossible to understand these terms. And it is not only these noble sciences: there is no mechanical art that is not mentioned.[21] And finally, Scripture is the Book that contains all books, and the science in which all sciences are included, and all of them serve for understanding it. Even after one knows them all (which, as anyone can see, is not easy, nor even possible), it requires one further condition beyond everything said so far. That condition is continual prayer and purity of life, to obtain from God the purification of spirit and illumination of mind needed to understand such lofty things. If this is lacking, none of the rest is of any use.

10 Of the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Church says these words: *When passages of Holy Scripture were difficult, he joined fasting to prayer. Indeed, he used to tell his companion Brother*

19 "Both laws" are canon law and civil law.

20 Genesis 18:23–32. The ratios are 10:9 and 9:8 (whole tones), 4:3 (the fourth), 3:2 (the fifth) and 2:1 (the octave).

21 Job 38:31–32. Sor Juana's word is *astrología*, which then covered what we call astronomy.

Reginald that whatever he knew he had not so much produced by his own study or labor as received as a gift from God. How then could I, so far from virtue and from learning, have the courage to write? [22] And so, to gain some foundations, I studied various things continually, without a particular inclination toward any one of them, but toward all in general. That is why I did not choose to study some more than others. It was the chance of finding books in certain fields closer to hand that gave those fields the preference, without any decision of mine. I had no interest to drive me, and no time limit, such as the requirements of degrees, to confine me to the continuous study of one subject. So I studied various things almost at once, or left some for others. Still, I kept an order in this: some I called study and others recreation, and in the latter I rested from the former. It follows that I have studied many things and know nothing, because each has hindered the others. It is true that I say this of the practical side, in those subjects that have one. Clearly, while the pen moves the compass rests, and while the harp is played the organ is still, *and so with the rest*. Acquiring a skill takes much bodily practice, so whoever divides himself among various exercises can never acquire a perfect one. But in the formal and speculative part the opposite happens, and I would like my experience to persuade everyone of it. These subjects not only do not hinder one another but help one another, each shedding light on the others and opening the way for them. They do so through variations and hidden links that the Wisdom of their Author placed in them for this universal chain. So they seem to correspond with one another, and are joined with admirable coherence and harmony. It is the chain that the ancients imagined coming from the mouth of Jupiter, from which all things hung, linked one to another. The Reverend Father Athanasius Kircher demonstrates this in his curious book *On the Magnet*. All things proceed from

22 From the Church's office for the feast of Aquinas. Reginald of Piperno was his companion and secretary.

God, who is at once the center and the circumference, from which all created lines go out and in which they all end.[23]

[11] For my part I can affirm that what I do not understand in an author in one field, I usually understand in another author in another field that seems very remote. And those same authors, in explaining themselves, draw metaphorical examples from other arts. So the logicians say that the middle term stands to the other terms as a measure stands to two distant bodies, used to compare whether they are equal or not. They also say that the logician's discourse moves like a straight line, by the shortest way, while the rhetorician's moves like a curve, by the longest, yet both reach the same point. And there is the saying that the expositors are like the open hand and the scholastics like the closed fist. So having studied various things is no excuse, nor do I offer it as one, since they rather help one another. My failure to profit has come from my own ineptitude and the weakness of my understanding, not from the variety. What might indeed serve as some excuse for me is the great labor of lacking both a teacher and fellow students with whom to discuss and practice what I had studied. My only teacher was a mute book, my only fellow student an insensible inkwell. And instead of explanation and practice I had many hindrances. Some came from my religious obligations (and everyone knows how usefully and profitably these spend one's time). Others came from the incidental things of a community. I would be reading, and the nuns in the next cell would take it into their heads to play and sing;[24] I would be studying, and two maids would quarrel and come to make me judge of their dispute; I would be writing, and a friend would come to visit me, doing me a very bad turn with very good will. Then one must not only put up with the hindrance but be grateful for the harm. And this happens continually. The hours I set aside for study are those left over from the com-

23 Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), German Jesuit polymath, published his book on magnetism in 1641. The golden chain hanging from Jupiter (Zeus) comes from Homer, *Iliad* 8.

24 The expositors are commentators on Scripture; the scholastics are the school theologians.

munity's regular routine, and those same hours are left over for the others to come and disturb me. Only those with experience of community life know how true this is. There, only the strength of my vocation can keep my nature content, together with the great love between me and my beloved Sisters; for since love is union, for love there are no distant extremes.

[12] In this, yes, I confess that my labor has been beyond telling. So I cannot say what I hear others say, and envy them for saying, that knowledge has cost them no effort. Happy are they! For me, not knowledge (for I still do not know) but merely the desire to know has cost so much effort that I could say with my father St. Jerome (though not with his profit): *What labor I spent on it, what difficulty I endured, how often I despaired, how often I gave up and, in my eagerness to learn, began again, my conscience is witness—both mine, who suffered it, and that of those who lived their lives with me.*[25] Except for the companions and witnesses (for I have lacked even that relief), I can truthfully affirm all the rest. To think that this wretched inclination of mine should be so strong that it has overcome everything!

INTERRUPTIONS

Convent life, visits and her love for her sisters keep pulling her away from study.

[13] Among the other blessings I owe to God is a nature so gentle and so affable that the nuns love me very much for it (being good women, they overlook my faults), and so they greatly enjoy my company. Knowing this, and moved by the great love I have for them, I enjoy theirs even more, and with greater reason than they have to enjoy mine. So it used to happen that in the free moments that we all had, I would go to comfort them and refresh myself with their conversation. I noticed that at those times I was neglecting my study, and I made a vow not to enter any cell unless obedience or charity obliged me to. Without so harsh a curb, love would have broken through a curb of mere

25 Jerome, Letter 125 (to Rusticus), describing his struggle to learn Hebrew.

resolution. Knowing my frailty, I made this vow for a month, or for a fortnight. When it expired, I would give myself a day or two of truce and then renew it. That day served not so much for my rest (for not studying has never been rest for me) as to keep my dearest Sisters from thinking me harsh, withdrawn, and ungrateful for their undeserved affection.

[14] This shows clearly enough how strong my inclination is. Blessed be God, who willed that it should turn toward letters and not toward some other vice, which in me would have been almost unconquerable. One can also infer how much against the current my poor studies have sailed (or, better said, have been shipwrecked). For the hardest of the difficulties is still to be told. Those I have described so far have been only obligatory or incidental hindrances, which hinder indirectly. There remain the positive ones, which have aimed directly at hindering and forbidding my study. Who would not believe, seeing such widespread applause, that I have sailed before a following wind on a sea smooth as milk, borne up on the palms of general acclaim? Yet God knows it has not been quite so. Among the flowers of that very acclaim, so many asps of envy and persecution have reared up and awakened that I could never count them; and the ones that have been most harmful and most painful to me are not those who have persecuted me with open hatred and ill will. They are those who, loving me and wishing me well (and perhaps earning great merit with God for their good intention), have mortified and tormented me more than the others with that refrain: *This study is not fitting for the holy ignorance that is her duty; she is bound to be lost; at such heights her very perspicacity and sharpness will make her head swim.* What must it have cost me to withstand this? A strange kind of martyrdom, in which I was the martyr and my own executioner! And as for my ability to write verses (in my case doubly unfortunate), even sacred ones, what griefs has it not caused me? Or rather, which has it failed to cause me? Truly, my lady, I sometimes stop to reflect that whoever stands out, or whom God singles out (for he alone can do so), is received as a common enemy. To some it seems that such

a person usurps the applause they deserve, or dams up for himself the admiration they aspired to, and so they persecute him. That law of Athens, crude in its statecraft, by which anyone who stood out in gifts and virtues was banished from the republic so that he might not use them to tyrannize over public liberty, still endures. It is still observed in our own times, even though the Athenians' motive no longer exists. There is another motive, no less effective though not so well founded, for it looks like a maxim of the impious Machiavelli: to hate whoever stands out because he outshines others. So it happens, and so it has always happened.[26]

PERSECUTED FOR HER GIFTS

She argues that anyone who stands out, like Christ crowned with thorns, attracts envy and persecution.

15 If this is not so, what was the cause of the Pharisees' furious hatred of Christ, when there were so many reasons for the opposite? If we consider his presence, what gift could be more lovable than that divine beauty? What could be more powerful to carry off hearts? Any human beauty holds sway over the will and knows how to subdue it with a gentle and welcome force. What, then, would that beauty do, with so many sovereign prerogatives and endowments? What would it do, what would it move? And what would it not do, what would it not move, that incomprehensible loveliness, through whose beautiful face, as through polished crystal, the rays of the Godhead were shining? What would that countenance not move, which, over and above its incomparable human perfections, showed the radiance of the divine? If the face of Moses, merely from conversing with God, was unbearable to the weakness of human sight, what must the face of God made man have been? And if we turn to his other gifts, what could be more lovable than that heavenly modesty? Than that gentleness and mildness, pouring out mercies in all

26 Ostracism, by which the citizens of Athens could vote to exile a prominent man for ten years.

his movements? Than that profound humility and meekness? Than those words of eternal life and eternal wisdom? How, then, is it possible that all this did not carry off their souls, and that they did not follow him, enamored and uplifted?[27] The holy Mother Teresa, who is my mother too, says that after she saw the beauty of Christ she was freed from any inclination toward any creature, because compared with that beauty she saw nothing that was not ugliness. Why, then, did it have so contrary an effect on those men? Even if, being coarse and base, they had no knowledge or esteem of his perfections, should not their own interest and advantage at least have moved them, as self-seeking men, given the many benefits he did them by healing the sick, raising the dead, and curing those possessed by demons? Why, then, did they not love him?[28] Oh God, it was for that very reason that they did not love him, for that very reason that they hated him! They themselves testified to it.

16 They gather in their council and say: *What are we doing? For this man performs many signs.* Is that a reason? If they had said that he was an evildoer, a lawbreaker, an agitator who stirred up the people with deceptions, they would have been lying, as indeed they lied when they did say it. Still, those would have been grounds more in keeping with what they sought, which was to take his life. But to give as grounds that he does signal things does not seem worthy of learned men, as the Pharisees were. Yet so it is: when learned men are carried away by passion, they burst out with such inconsistencies. Truly, it was for that reason alone that they resolved Christ should die.[29] Men (if you can be called men, being so brutish), why so cruel a resolution? They answer nothing more than that *he performs many signs*. God help me! Is doing signal things a reason for someone to die? This *He performs many signs* calls out in echo to that other text, *O root of Jesse, who stand as a sign to the peoples!*, and to

27 Exodus 34:29–35, where Moses' face shines after speaking with God.
28 St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), *Life* ch. 37. Sor Juana had briefly been a novice in Teresa's order, the Discalced Carmelites, before entering the convent of San Jerónimo.
29 John 11:47.

another, *For a sign that shall be contradicted*. A sign? Then let him die. Marked out? Then let him suffer, for that is the reward of whoever stands out.[30] On the heights of churches it is the custom to place figures of the winds and of Fame as ornaments, and to protect them from the birds they are covered all over with spikes. It looks like a defense, but it is only a necessary property: whoever stands on high cannot be without spikes to prick him. Up there is the spite of the air, the harshness of the elements. There the thunderbolts vent their anger, and there is the target for stones and arrows. O unhappy height, exposed to so many dangers! O sign, set up as a target for envy and an object of contradiction! Every eminence, whether of rank, of nobility, of wealth, of beauty, or of learning, pays this tax. But the one that feels it most harshly is eminence of the understanding. First, because it is the most defenseless. Wealth and power punish whoever dares to affront them, but the understanding does not, for the greater it is, the more modest and long-suffering it is, and the less it defends itself. Second, because, as Gracián learnedly said, superiority in understanding is superiority in being.[31] The angel is more than man for no other reason than that he understands more. The only advantage man has over the brute is understanding. And so, just as no one wants to be less than another, no one admits that another understands more, because that would mean the other is more. A person will put up with it and admit that another is nobler than he, or richer, or more handsome, and even more learned. But hardly anyone will admit that another is more intelligent: *Rare is the man who is willing to yield in wit.* That is why the assault on this gift is so effective.

17 When the soldiers made Our Lord Jesus Christ the object of their mockery, sport, and amusement, they brought an old purple robe, a hollow reed, and a crown of thorns, to crown him

30 Isaiah 11:10 and Luke 2:34. Sor Juana plays on *señalar* (to mark out, distinguish), *cosas señaladas* (signal, remarkable deeds), and the Latin *signum* (sign).

31 Baltasar Gracián (1601–1658), Spanish Jesuit moralist; the idea is from his *El Héroe* (*The Hero*).

as a mock king. Now, the reed and the purple were insulting but not painful. Why, then, is the crown alone painful? Was it not enough that it should serve, like the other insignia, for scorn and ignominy, since that was their aim? No, because the sacred head of Christ and that divine brain were the repository of wisdom. In this world it is not enough for a wise brain to be mocked; it must also be wounded and ill-treated. A head that is a treasury of wisdom should expect no crown but one of thorns. What garland can human wisdom expect, when it sees the one that divine wisdom received? Roman pride crowned the various exploits of its generals with various crowns. The civic crown went to the man who saved a citizen, the camp crown to the man who broke into the enemy's camp, and the mural crown to the man who scaled the wall. The obsidional crown went to the man who relieved a besieged city, or an army under siege in the field or in its camp. The naval, the ovation, and the triumphal crowns rewarded other exploits, as Pliny and Aulus Gellius report.[32] Seeing so many kinds of crowns, I wondered which kind Christ's would be, and it seems to me that it was the obsidional. That crown (as you know, my lady) was the most honorable. It was called obsidional from *obsidio,* which means siege, and it was made not of gold or silver but of the very grass or herbage that grew on the field where the feat was accomplished. Christ's feat was to make the Prince of Darkness raise his siege, for he held the whole earth besieged, as he says in the Book of Job: *I have gone round the earth and walked through it*.[33] And St. Peter says of him: *He goes about seeking whom he may devour*. Then our Captain came and made him raise the siege: *Now the prince of this world shall be cast out*. So the soldiers crowned him not with gold or silver but with the natural fruit produced by the world, which was the field of battle. After the curse, *thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you*, the world produced nothing but thorns. And so a crown of thorns was the most fitting for the valiant and wise victor, and with it his mother the Synagogue

32 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 22.4–6, and Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 5.6.
33 Job 1:7, Satan's words to God.

crowned him.[34] The daughters of Zion come out to see the sorrowful triumph: they went out rejoicing for the other Solomon, but weeping for this one. For this is the triumph of the wise, won with pain and celebrated with tears, which is how wisdom triumphs. And it was Christ, as wisdom's King, who first wore that crown, so that once it had been sanctified on his brow it might lose its horror for other wise men, and they might understand that they must aspire to no other honor.[35]

18 Life itself chose to go and give life to the dead Lazarus. The disciples did not know his purpose and objected: *Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?* The Redeemer answered their fear: *Are there not twelve hours in the day?* Up to this point, it seems, they were afraid because of the precedent: the Jews had wanted to stone him for rebuking them and calling them thieves and not shepherds of the sheep.[36] So they feared that if he was going for the same purpose, his life would be in danger, since rebukes, however just, are usually ill received. But once they had been set right and told that he was going to give life to Lazarus, what reason could have moved Thomas to summon here the same courage Peter showed in the Garden, and say: *Let us also go, that we may die with him*? What are you saying, holy Apostle? The Lord is not going to die, so why the misgiving? Christ is going not to rebuke but to do a work of mercy, and for that they cannot harm him.[37] The Jews themselves could have reassured you. When he reproached them as they sought to stone him, *I have shown you many good works from my Father; for which of those works do you stone me?*, they answered him: *We do not stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy.* Then if they say they do not want to stone him for good works, and now he is going to do one as good as giving life to Lazarus, what is the misgiving about? Or why? Would it not

34 1 Peter 5:8; John 12:31; Genesis 3:18.
35 Song of Songs 3:11: "Go forth, daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon in the crown with which his mother crowned him"; the weeping daughters recall Luke 23:28.
36 John 11:8–9; the rebuke is in John 10.
37 John 11:16; Peter drew his sword in the garden of Gethsemane (John 18:10).

have been better to say: "Let us go and enjoy the fruit of gratitude for the good work our Master is going to do, to see him applauded and thanked for his kindness,[38] to see the wonder people show at the miracle"? Rather than saying something that seems so beside the point as *Let us go with him*? But ah, the saint feared like a wise man and spoke like an Apostle. Is Christ not going to perform a miracle? Then what greater danger could there be? It is less intolerable for pride to hear rebukes than for envy to see miracles. In all I have said, venerable lady, I do not mean (nor could such folly find room in me) that I have been persecuted for knowing. I mean only that I have been persecuted for having loved wisdom and letters, not for having attained either the one or the other.

19 The Prince of the Apostles was, at one time, as far from wisdom as that emphatic phrase stresses: *But Peter followed him from afar*. He who bore the title of indiscreet was far from the applause given the learned: *Not knowing what he said*. Even when examined on his knowledge of wisdom, he himself said that he had not attained the least notion of it: *Woman, I do not know what you are saying; woman, I do not know him*. And what happens to him? Though he had this reputation for ignorance, he did not have the good fortune of the wise, but he did have their afflictions. Why? No other cause was given than this: *And this man too was with him*.[39] He was devoted to wisdom. It carried away his heart, he went after it, and he prided himself on being a follower and lover of wisdom. And although he followed so *afar* that he neither understood it nor reached it, that was enough to bring its torments upon him. He lacked neither a soldier from outside to trouble him nor a woman of the household to harass him. I confess that I find myself very far from the bounds of wisdom, and that I have wished to follow it, though *afar*. But all of it has only brought me closer to the fire of persecution and the

38 John 10:32–33.

39 Peter's denial and the accusation against him are in Luke 22:54–60. "Not knowing what he said" is from the Transfiguration, Luke 9:33.

crucible of torment. It has gone to such an extreme that they have even sought to have study forbidden to me.

STUDYING THE WHOLE WORLD

Forbidden books for three months, she studies everything around her: buildings, spinning tops, games of pins.

[20] Once they succeeded, with a very saintly and very guileless mother superior who believed that study was a matter for the Inquisition, and she ordered me not to study. I obeyed her for the three months or so that her power to command lasted, as far as not picking up a book. But I could not obey her as to not studying at all, since that does not lie within my power. Although I did not study in books, I studied in all the things that God created, and they served me as letters, and this whole universal machine served me as a book. I saw nothing without reflecting on it and heard nothing without considering it, even in the smallest and most material things. For since there is no creature, however lowly, in which one cannot recognize the *God made me*, there is none that does not astonish the understanding, if it is considered as it should be. So, I say again, I looked at them all and marveled at them all. Even from the very people I spoke with, and from what they said to me, a thousand reflections kept springing up in me. Where could that variety of dispositions and wits come from, since all were of one species? What could be the temperaments and hidden qualities that caused it? If I saw a figure, I would be combining the proportion of its lines, measuring it with my understanding, and reducing it to other, different figures. Sometimes I would walk at the head of one of our dormitories, which is a very large room. I observed that although the lines of its two sides were parallel and its ceiling was level, the eye made it seem that its lines inclined toward each other and that its ceiling was lower at the far end than close by. From this I inferred that visual lines run straight but not parallel, and that they go on to form a pyramidal figure. And I wondered whether this might be the reason that led the

ancients to doubt whether the world was spherical or not. For although it appears so, this could be a deception of the eye, showing concavities where there might be none.

21 This kind of noticing happened to me in everything, and it always does, without my having any choice in it. In fact it often annoys me, because it tires my head. I believed that the same thing happened to everyone, as did making verses, until experience showed me otherwise. This nature, or habit, is such that I see nothing without a second consideration. Two little girls were playing with a top in front of me. No sooner had I seen its motion and shape than I began, with this madness of mine, to consider the easy motion of the spherical form. I considered how the impulse lasted once it was imparted, independent of its cause, since the little top went on dancing at a distance from the girl's hand, which was the moving cause. Not content with this, I had flour brought and sifted, so that when the top danced on it one could tell whether the circles it described with its motion were perfect or not. I found that they were nothing but spiral lines, which lost their circularity as the impulse died down. Other girls were playing at pins, which is the most frivolous game children play. I would go over to contemplate the figures they formed. Seeing that three of them happened to fall in a triangle, I set about linking one with another. I remembered that this was said to be the figure of Solomon's mysterious ring, in which there were faint distant glimmers and representations of the Most Holy Trinity, and by virtue of which it worked so many prodigies and marvels. It was also the shape that David's harp is said to have had, which is why Saul was healed at its sound, and harps in our day keep almost the same shape.[40]

40 Legend gave Solomon a magic seal ring. David's playing soothed Saul in 1 Samuel 16:23.

PHILOSOPHY IN THE KITCHEN

She describes what cooking has taught her and how her mind keeps reasoning even in sleep.

22 Then what could I tell you, my lady, of the natural secrets I have discovered while cooking? I see that an egg holds together and fries in lard or oil, but falls apart in syrup. I see that to keep sugar fluid it is enough to add a very tiny bit of water in which quince or some other sour fruit has been steeped. I see that the yolk and the white of one and the same egg are so contrary that, in the eggs used with sugar, each one works on its own, but not the two together. But I will not weary you with such trifles, which I relate only to give you full knowledge of my nature, and which I believe will make you laugh. But, my lady, what can we women know except kitchen philosophies? Lupercio Leonardo said it well: *How well one can philosophize and still get supper ready*. And when I see these little things, I often say: *If Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more*.[41] Continuing with my way of thinking, I say that this is so constant in me that I do not need books. On one occasion, because of a serious stomach ailment, the doctors forbade me to study. I spent a few days that way, and then I put it to them that it would be less harmful to allow me books. My thoughts were so strong and vehement that they consumed more spirits in a quarter of an hour than the study of books did in four days. So they were brought to allow me to read. And what is more, my lady, not even sleep was free from this continual motion of my imagination;[42] in sleep, in fact, it tends to work more freely and unencumbered, going over the images it has kept from the day with greater clarity and calm. It argues and makes verses, and I could give you a very large catalogue of these, and of some arguments and subtleties that I have arrived at better asleep than awake. I leave them aside so as not

41 Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola (1559–1613), Aragonese poet and historian.
42 "Spirits": the subtle vital and animal spirits of the old physiology, thought to be used up by mental effort.

to weary you, since what I have said is enough for your discretion and penetration to see into my whole nature and understand it perfectly, together with the beginning, means, and present state of my studies.

LEARNED WOMEN

She lists learned women from the Bible, antiquity, the Church and her own day.

[23] If these things, my lady, were merits, as I see them celebrated as such in men, they would not have been merits in me, because I act out of necessity. If they are a fault, then for the same reason I believe I have not been at fault. Yet for all that, I always live so distrustful of myself that neither in this nor in anything else do I trust my own judgment. So I submit the decision to that sovereign talent of yours, and I yield at once to whatever you decide, without contradiction or reluctance, since this has been no more than a simple account of my inclination to letters. I also confess that, although this is so true that, as I have said, I needed no examples, the many examples I have read, in sacred as well as secular letters, have still not failed to help me. For I see a Deborah giving laws, in military as well as political matters, and governing the people in a place where there were so many learned men. I see a most wise Queen of Sheba, so learned that she dares to test the wisdom of the greatest of the wise with riddles, without being reproached for it. On the contrary, she will be the judge of unbelievers for it.[43] I see so many and such distinguished women. Some are adorned with the gift of prophecy, like an Abigail; others with persuasion, like Esther; others with piety, like Rahab; others with perseverance, like Hannah, mother of Samuel; and countless others with other kinds of gifts and virtues.

[24] If I turn to the Gentiles, the first I come upon are the Sibyls, chosen by God to prophesy the principal mysteries of our faith,

43 Deborah judged Israel (Judges 4–5). The Queen of Sheba tested Solomon (1 Kings 10) and is to judge "this generation" (Matthew 12:42).

in verses so learned and elegant that they hold wonder spellbound. I see a woman like Minerva worshiped as goddess of the sciences, daughter of the first Jupiter and teacher of all the wisdom of Athens. I see a Polla Argentaria, who helped her husband Lucan write the great Battle of Pharsalia. I see the daughter of the divine Tiresias, more learned than her father. I see a Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrenes, as wise as she was brave.[44] An Arete, daughter of Aristippus, most learned. Nicostrata, inventor of the Latin letters and most erudite in the Greek. An Aspasia of Miletus, who taught philosophy and rhetoric and was the teacher of the philosopher Pericles. A Hypatia, who taught astronomy and lectured for a long time in Alexandria. A Leontium, a Greek woman, who wrote against the philosopher Theophrastus and refuted him. A Jucia, a Corinna, a Cornelia. In short, I see the whole great throng of those who earned the names now of Greeks, now of Muses, now of Pythonesses, since all of them were nothing but learned women, held, celebrated, and also venerated as such by antiquity. And there are countless others with whom books are filled. I see that Egyptian Catherine, reading and refuting all the wisdom of the wise men of Egypt. I see a Gertrude reading, writing, and teaching.[45] And not to look for examples outside the house, I see a most holy mother of mine, Paula, learned in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin tongues and most apt at interpreting the Scriptures. And what more? Her chronicler was no less than a Jerome the Greatest, and the saint scarcely found himself worthy of the task. With that lively emphasis and forceful efficacy with which he knows how to express himself, he says: *If all the members of my body were tongues, they would not suffice to proclaim the wisdom and virtue of Paula*.[46] Blaesilla, a widow, earned the same praises, and so did the illustrious virgin Eustochium, both daughters of the same

44 Lucan's epic *Pharsalia* tells of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. Tiresias's daughter was the prophetess Manto.

45 Catherine of Alexandria was said to have refuted the pagan philosophers. Gertrude the Great (1256–c. 1302) was a German mystic.

46 Hence "mother of mine" and "the house": Paula was a founder of Sor Juana's order. Jerome was called the "Greatest Doctor" in expounding Scripture.

saint. The second was such that for her learning she was called *Prodigy of the World*. Fabiola, a Roman, was also most learned in Holy Scripture. Proba, a Roman woman, wrote an elegant book of centos from Virgil on the mysteries of our holy faith. Our Queen Doña Isabel, wife of Alfonso the Tenth, is commonly said to have written on astronomy.[47] There are others I omit, so as not to copy what others have said, which is a vice I have always abhorred. In our own times the great Christina Alexandra, queen of Sweden, flourishes, as learned as she is brave and magnanimous; *and the most excellent ladies the Duchess of Aveiro and the Countess of Villaumbrosa*.[48]

MAY WOMEN STUDY AND TEACH?

Citing Arce, Jerome and St. Paul, she argues that women may study and teach in private.

[25] The venerable Doctor Arce, a worthy professor of Scripture for his virtue and learning, raises this question in his studious *Bibliorum*: *Is it lawful for women to apply themselves to the study of the Holy Bible, and to interpret it?* On the opposing side he brings forward many sayings of saints, especially that of the Apostle: *Let women keep silent in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak, etc.*[49] He then brings forward other sayings, including that passage of the same Apostle to Titus: *The aged women likewise in holy attire, teaching well*, with interpretations of the holy Fathers. In the end, with his prudence, he concludes that lecturing publicly from university chairs and preaching from pulpits is not lawful for women. But studying, writing, and teaching privately is not only lawful for them but very profitable and useful. Of course, this is not to be understood of all women, but of those

47 A cento is a poem pieced together from lines of an earlier poet. Alfonso X "the Wise" of Castile sponsored astronomical works; his queen was in fact Violante of Aragon.

48 Christina of Sweden (1626–1689) abdicated and settled in Rome. The Duchess of Aveiro, María de Guadalupe de Lencastre, was a learned patroness.

49 Juan Díaz de Arce, professor in Mexico City, author of *Quaestionarium expositivum … pro studioso Bibliorum* (1647–48). The Apostle's words are from 1 Corinthians 14:34.

whom God has endowed with special virtue and prudence, who are very advanced and erudite, and who have the talent and qualifications necessary for so sacred an occupation;[50] and this is so just that interpreting the sacred letters ought to be forbidden not only to women, who are held to be so inept, but also to men, who think they are wise merely by being men, unless they are very learned and virtuous, with docile and well-disposed minds. For it is from the contrary, I believe, that so many sectarians have come, and this has been the root of so many heresies. There are many who study in order to be ignorant, especially those of arrogant, restless, and proud spirits, fond of novelties in the Law, which is the very thing that rejects them. And so they are not content until, by saying what no one has said, they say a heresy. Of these the Holy Spirit says: *Wisdom will not enter a malicious soul*. To such people knowing does more harm than not knowing would do. A wit once said: *He who does not know Latin is not a complete fool; but he who knows it is a certified one*. And I add that what perfects him, if foolishness can be perfection, is having studied his bit of philosophy and theology and having some knowledge of languages. With that he is a fool in many sciences and languages, because a great fool cannot fit into his mother tongue alone.[51]

[26] To these people, I say again, studying does harm, because it is putting a sword in the hands of a madman. Though it is a most noble instrument for defense, in his hands it is death to himself and to many others. Such were the divine letters in the power of the wicked Pelagius, the perverse Arius, the wicked Luther, and the other heresiarchs, and so they were for our Doctor Cazalla, who was never ours, nor a doctor. To these men wisdom did harm. Wisdom is the best nourishment and the life of the soul. But in an ill-constituted stomach of vitiated heat, the better the food it receives, the drier, more fermented, and more perverse the humors it produces. In the same way, the more these malevolent men study, the worse the opinions they breed. Their

50 Titus 2:3.
51 Wisdom 1:4.

understanding is obstructed by the very thing that should have nourished it. The fact is that they study much and digest little, without measuring themselves against the limited vessel of their understanding.[52] To this the Apostle says: *For I say, through the grace that is given me, to all who are among you: not to be wiser than one ought to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety, and to each as God has apportioned the measure of faith*. And in truth, the Apostle did not say this to women, but to men. The *let them keep silent* is not only for women, but for all who are not very apt.[53] If I wish to know as much as Aristotle or St. Augustine, or more, without having the aptitude of St. Augustine or of Aristotle, then even if I study more than both of them, not only will I fail to achieve it, but I will weaken and dull the working of my feeble understanding through the disproportion of the object.

27 Oh, if all of us (and I first of all, for I am an ignorant woman) took the measure of our talent before we studied (and, what is worse, before we wrote) with an ambitious greed to equal and even to surpass others, how little spirit we would have left! How many errors we would spare ourselves, and how many twisted interpretations now going about would not be going about! And I put my own in first place, for if I knew this as I ought, I would not write. I protest that I do so only to obey you, and with such misgiving that you owe me more for taking up the pen with this fear than you would owe me if I sent you more perfect works. But very well, it goes to you for correction. Strike it out, tear it up, and reprove me, for I will value that more than all the empty applause others can give me: *The just man shall correct me in mercy and rebuke me; but let not the oil of the sinner anoint my head.*[54]

28 And returning to our Arce, I say that he cites, in confirmation of his view, those words of my father St. Jerome *to Laeta, on the education of her daughter*, where he says: *While her tongue is*

52 Agustín de Cazalla (1510–1559), a Spanish cleric executed in Valladolid for Lutheranism.
53 Romans 12:3.
54 Psalm 141:5 (Vulgate 140:5).

still tender, let it be steeped in the sweet psalms. Let the very names by which she gradually grows used to putting words together not be chosen at random, but fixed and deliberately gathered: those of the prophets, that is, and of the apostles; and let the whole line of patriarchs from Adam come down to her from Matthew and Luke, so that while she is doing something else she is being prepared for future remembrance. Let her render you each day a set task gathered from the flowers of the Scriptures. Well then, if the saint wanted a little girl who was barely beginning to talk to be educated this way, what will he want for his nuns and his spiritual daughters?[55] This is plainly seen in Eustochium and Fabiola, already mentioned, and in Marcella, her sister, Pacatula, and others whom the saint honors in his letters, urging them to this holy exercise. It is seen as well in the letter cited, where I noted that *Let her render you*, which echoes and agrees with St. Paul's *teaching well*. For my great father's *Let her render you* makes it clear that the girl's teacher is to be Laeta herself, her mother.[56]

29 Oh, how much harm would be avoided in our commonwealth if older women were learned, like Laeta, and knew how to teach, as St. Paul and my father St. Jerome command! But for lack of this, and because of the extreme negligence in which poor women have come to be left, if some parents wish to give their daughters more instruction than usual, necessity and the lack of wise older women force them to bring in male teachers to teach reading, writing and arithmetic, playing music, and other accomplishments. Not a little harm results from this, as we see every day in pitiful examples of unequal matches. For with close dealings and long company, what no one thought possible often becomes easy. For this reason many would rather leave their daughters uneducated and uncultivated than expose them to so evident a danger as familiarity with men. This would be avoided if there were learned older women, as St. Paul wishes, and the office of teaching passed from one to the next,

55 Jerome, Letter 107, to Laeta.

56 St. Paul's phrase comes from Titus 2:3, where older women are to be "teaching well."

as happens with needlework and the other customary skills. For what objection can there be to an older woman, learned in letters and holy in conversation and conduct, having charge of the education of young girls? Instead, these girls are lost either for lack of instruction or through attempts to give it to them by such dangerous means as male teachers. Even if there were no greater risk than the indecency of a man who is a stranger sitting beside a modest woman (who blushes even when her own father looks her in the face), dealing with her with household familiarity and treating her with a teacher's ease, the modesty proper to dealings and conversation with men would be reason enough not to allow it. And I do not find that this way of men teaching women can be free of danger, except in the severe tribunal of the confessional, or the distant decorum of the pulpit, or the remote acquaintance of books—but not in the handling that comes with closeness. Everyone knows this is true, and yet it is permitted, only for want of wise older women. Is it not, then, a great harm that there are none? This is what they ought to consider who, tied to *Let women keep silent in the churches*, rail against women knowing and teaching—as though it were not the same Apostle who said *teaching well*. Besides, that prohibition concerned the historical circumstance that Eusebius reports: in the early Church women would set about teaching one another doctrine in the churches, and their murmuring caused confusion while the apostles were preaching. That is why they were told to keep silent, just as now no one prays aloud while the preacher is preaching.

[30] There is no doubt that to understand many passages one needs a great deal of history, customs, ceremonies, proverbs, and even the ways of speaking of the times in which they were written, in order to know what certain expressions in sacred letters bear on and allude to. *Rend your hearts and not your garments*: is this not an allusion to the Hebrews' ceremony of tearing their clothes as a sign of grief, as the wicked high priest did when he said that Christ had blasphemed? Did not many of the Apostle's passages on the relief of widows also look to the cus-

toms of those times?[57] That passage on the Strong Woman, *Her husband is noble in the gates*: does it not allude to the custom of holding the judges' courts at the city gates? Did not *To give land to God* mean to make some vow? Were not public sinners called *the winterers* because they did penance in the open air, unlike the others, who did it in a porch? And Christ's complaint to the Pharisee about the missing kiss and the washing of feet—was it not founded on the Jews' custom of doing these things?[58] And countless other passages, not only in sacred letters but in secular ones too, met with at every step: such as *Adore the purple*, which means to obey the king; or *To manumit him*, which means to give freedom, alluding to the custom and ceremony of giving a slave a slap in order to set him free. Or Virgil's *I thundered the sky*, which alludes to the omen of thunder in the west, held to be a good one. Or Martial's *You never ate hare*, which has not only the wit of the double meaning in *leporem* but also the allusion to the property hares were said to have.[59] Or the proverb *When you sail past Malea, forget what is at home*, which alludes to the great danger of the Laconian promontory? Or the chaste matron's reply to her troublesome suitor, *no doorposts will be anointed for me, nor will torches burn*, meaning that she did not wish to marry, and alluding to the ceremony of anointing the doors with fat and lighting the wedding torches at marriages? It is as if we were to say now, "No wedding coins will be spent on my account, nor will the priest give any blessings." And that is why there are so many commentaries on Virgil and Homer and all the poets and orators.[60] Beyond this, what difficulties are not found in the sacred passages, even in their grammar! There is the putting of the plural for the singular, and the passing from the second person to the third, as in that verse of the Song of Songs: *Let him kiss me*

57 Joel 2:13; the high priest tears his garments in Matthew 26:65.
58 Proverbs 31:23; Luke 7:44–46.
59 Virgil's phrase recalls *Aeneid* 2.693, where thunder is a favorable omen. In Martial 5.29, eating hare was thought to make one beautiful for seven days, and *leporem* ("hare") also suggests *lepos*, "charm."
60 Cape Malea, at the southern tip of the Peloponnese, was notorious for storms. The *arras* were the coins a bridegroom gave his bride in a Spanish wedding.

with the kiss of his mouth, for your breasts are better than wine. There is the putting of adjectives in the genitive instead of the accusative, as in *I will take the cup of salvation*. There is the putting of the feminine for the masculine, and the reverse; and the calling of any sin adultery.[61]

31 All this demands more reading than some people think, who as mere grammarians, or at most with a handful of terms from the *summulae*, want to interpret the Scriptures. They cling to *Let women keep silent in the churches* without knowing how it is to be understood, and to another passage, *Let a woman learn in silence*. Yet this passage is more in favor of women than against them, since it commands them to learn; and while they are learning, clearly they must be silent. It is also written: *Hear, O Israel, and be silent*.[62] There the whole assembly of men and women is addressed, and all are commanded to be silent; for whoever listens and learns has every reason to pay attention and keep quiet. Otherwise, I would like these interpreters and expounders of St. Paul to explain to me how they understand that passage, *Let women keep silent in the churches*. For they must understand it either materially, of pulpits and lecterns, or formally, of the whole body of the faithful, which is the Church. If they understand it in the first way—which is, in my opinion, its true meaning, since we see that in fact women are not permitted to lecture publicly or to preach in church—why do they reprove those who study in private? And if they understand it in the second way, and want the Apostle's prohibition to extend so far that women may not write or study even in private, how is it that we see the Church has allowed a Gertrude, a Teresa, a Bridget, the nun of Ágreda, and many others to write?[63] And if they tell me that *these were saints*, that is true, but it does not weaken my argument. First, because St. Paul's statement is absolute and includes all women, with no exception for saints. In his time,

61 Song of Songs 1:1 (1:2 in English Bibles) and Psalm 116:13 (Vulgate 115:13).
62 1 Timothy 2:11. The *summulae* were elementary textbooks of logic.
63 St. Bridget of Sweden (14th century) was a mystical writer; Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–1665) wrote *The Mystical City of God*.

too, Martha and Mary, Marcella, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were saints, as were many others in the fervor of the early Church, and he does not except them; and now we see that the Church permits women to write whether they are saints or not, for the nun of Ágreda and María de la Antigua are not canonized, and their writings circulate; nor were St. Teresa and the others canonized when they wrote. Therefore St. Paul's prohibition concerned only the public pulpit, for if the Apostle had forbidden writing, the Church would not permit it.[64] Now, I do not dare to teach—that would be excessive presumption in me—and writing requires greater talent than mine, and very great reflection. So says St. Cyprian: *What we write calls for grave consideration*. All I have wanted is to study in order to be less ignorant; for, according to St. Augustine, some things are learned in order to act and others only in order to know: *We learn some things in order to know them, others in order to do them*. Then where has the crime been, if I do not even do what is permitted to women—teaching by writing—because I know I lack the capacity for it? In this I follow the advice of Quintilian: *Let each know himself, and take counsel not only from the precepts of others but from his own nature*. If the crime lies in the Athenagoric Letter, was that anything more than a simple statement of my opinion, with all the deference I owe our Holy Mother Church? Well then, if she, with her most holy authority, does not forbid it to me, why should others forbid it? Was it boldness in me to hold an opinion contrary to Vieira's, and not boldness in His Paternity to hold one against the three holy Fathers of the Church?[65] Is my understanding, such as it is, not as free as his, since both come from the same stock? Is his opinion one of the revealed principles of the holy faith, that we must believe it with our eyes shut? Besides, I did not fail in the respect owed to so great a man, as his defender here has failed, forgetting the maxim of Titus

64 María de la Antigua (1566–1617) was a Spanish nun whose spiritual writings were published after her death.

65 Vieira's sermon disputed the views of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and St. John Chrysostom on Christ's greatest act of love.

Livius: *Let decorum accompany the arts*. Nor did I touch so much as a thread of the holy Society's cloak; nor did I write for anyone but the judgment of the person who suggested it to me. And according to Pliny, *The position of one who publishes is not like that of one who speaks to a particular person*.[66] For if I had thought it was going to be published, it would not have been written as carelessly as it was. If it is heretical, as the censor says, why does he not denounce it? With that he will be avenged and I content, for I value—as I ought—the name of Catholic and obedient daughter of my Holy Mother Church more than all the applause I might receive as a learned woman. If it is crude (and in that he is right), let him laugh, even if it is with what they call the rabbit's laugh. I am not asking him to applaud me; for just as I was free to dissent from Vieira, anyone will be free to dissent from my judgment.[67]

32 But where am I going, my lady? This does not belong here, nor is it for your ears. As I was speaking of my critics, I remembered the phrases of one who has just appeared, and my pen slipped, without my noticing, into wanting to answer him in particular, when my intention was to speak in general. And so, returning to our Arce: he says that he knew two nuns in this city. One, in the convent of Regina, had the breviary so thoroughly by heart that in conversation she applied its verses, psalms, and sentences from the homilies of the saints with the greatest readiness and aptness.[68] The other, in the convent of the Conception, was so accustomed to reading the letters of my father St. Jerome, and to the saint's turns of phrase, that Arce says: *I would have thought I was hearing Jerome himself speaking Spanish*. Of this second nun he says that he learned after her death that she had translated those letters into Spanish; and he regrets that such talents had not been employed in greater studies, grounded in the principles of the sciences. He does not give the name of

66 Vieira was a Jesuit, hence the "holy Society." The "defender" is an unidentified writer who had attacked her critique.

67 The "rabbit's laugh" was proverbial for a forced, sour grin.

68 The convents of Regina Coeli and of the Conception were both in Mexico City.

either, though he cites them to confirm his view: that the study of sacred letters is not only permissible but most useful and necessary for women, and much more so for nuns. That is the very thing to which your discretion urges me, and for which so many reasons concur.

IN DEFENSE OF VERSE

She defends writing verse, citing Scripture and the saints, and explains how the Athenagoric Letter came to be.

33 Then if I turn my eyes to the much-persecuted gift of making verses—which in me is so natural that I even have to force myself to keep this letter from coming out in verse, and I might say with the poet, *Whatever I tried to say was verse*—[69] seeing it so harshly condemned and denounced by so many, I have searched very deliberately for the harm that verses can do, and I have not found it. On the contrary, I see them applauded in the mouths of the Sibyls and sanctified in the pens of the prophets, especially King David. Of him the great expositor, my beloved father, says, explaining the measures of his meters: *In the manner of Horace and Pindar, now it runs in iambs, now it rings out in alcaics, now it swells in sapphics, and now it moves in half-feet.*[70] Most of the sacred books are in meter, like the Song of Moses, and the books of Job, as St. Isidore says in his *Etymologies*, are in heroic verse. Solomon wrote verses in his epithalamia, and Jeremiah in his Lamentations. And so Cassiodorus says: *All poetic speech took its beginning from the divine Scriptures*. Our Catholic Church not only does not disdain verses but uses them in its hymns, and recites those of St. Ambrose, St. Thomas, St. Isidore and others. St. Bonaventure was so fond of them that there is hardly a page of his without verses.[71] St. Paul plainly had studied them, for he

69 Ovid, *Tristia* 4.10.26, where the poet describes how verse came to him unbidden.

70 The "beloved father" is St. Jerome; the quotation, about the Psalter, comes from his preface to his translation of Eusebius's *Chronicle*.

71 The "epithalamia" (wedding songs) are the Song of Songs, traditionally ascribed to Solomon.

quotes and translates the line of Aratus, *For in him we live, and move, and are*, and he cites that other line of Parmenides, *Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, idle*. St. Gregory of Nazianzus debates the questions of marriage and of virginity in elegant verse. But why do I wear myself out?[72] The Queen of Wisdom, Our Lady, intoned the canticle of the Magnificat with her sacred lips. Having brought her forward as an example, it would be an insult to bring profane examples, even those of the gravest and most learned men, for this is more than enough proof. And there is the further fact that Hebrew elegance could not be squeezed into Latin measure, and so the sacred translator, more attentive to what mattered in the sense, left out the verse; yet the Psalms still keep the name and divisions of verses. So what harm can there be in verses in themselves?[73] For misuse is the fault not of the art but of the bad practitioner who corrupts verses, making them snares of the devil, and this happens in every faculty and science. And if the harm lies in a woman's using them, it is plain how many women have used them laudably; so where is the harm in my being one? I confess at once my baseness and vileness, but I do not think anyone will have seen an indecent verse of mine. Besides, I have never written anything of my own will, but only at the requests and commands of others—so much so that I do not remember writing anything for my own pleasure except a little paper they call *The Dream*.[74] That letter, which you, my lady, so honored, I wrote with more reluctance than anything else, both because it dealt with sacred things, for which, as I have said, I have a reverent fear, and because it seemed to set out to refute someone, a thing for which I have a natural aversion. And I believe that if I could have foreseen the happy destiny to which it was born—for like another Moses I cast it out, a foundling, on the waters of the Nile of silence,

72 Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12; the line on the Cretans is usually attributed to Epimenides.

73 The Magnificat is Mary's song in Luke 1:46–55; the "sacred translator" is St. Jerome, author of the Latin Vulgate.

74 *Primero sueño* (*First Dream*), her long philosophical poem on the soul's attempt to know the universe, published in 1692.

where a princess like you found it and cherished it—[75] I believe, I say again, that had I imagined such a thing, I would sooner have smothered it in the very hands in which it was born, for fear that the clumsy blots of my ignorance would show in the light of your knowledge. From this the greatness of your kindness is known, since your will is applauding what your most brilliant understanding must surely be rejecting. But since its fortune cast it at your doors, such a foundling and orphan that you even gave it its name, I am sorry that among my deformities it should also have carried the defects of haste. There was the poor health I constantly suffer, and the abundance of tasks that obedience lays on me; I had no one to help me write and was obliged to do everything in my own hand; and since the work went against my nature and I wanted only to keep my word to one I could not disobey, I could hardly wait to finish. And so I left out whole arguments and many proofs that occurred to me, and I left them out so as not to write more.[76] Had I known it was to be printed, I would not have left them out, if only to settle some objections that have been raised and that I could send you. But I will not be so discourteous as to set such indecent objects before the purity of your eyes; it is enough that I offend them with my ignorance, without sending them the impudence of others. If those objections should fly over there on their own (and they are so light that they will), you will command me what I ought to do. For unless your commands intervene, I will never take up my pen in my own defense, because it seems to me that one who knows his error in the very act of hiding needs no one else to answer him. For, as my father St. Jerome says, *Good speech does not seek secrecy*. And St. Ambrose: *To hide is the mark of a guilty conscience*.

75 The Athenagoric Letter; the image is of the infant Moses set adrift and found by Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:1–10).

76 The bishop himself gave the critique its title when he had it printed in 1690.

ANSWERING HER CRITICS

She declines to answer her detractors, prefers patience to praise, and closes with apologies for her familiar style.

34 Nor do I consider myself refuted, for a rule of law says: *An accusation does not stand if it takes no account of the person who brought it*. What is worth weighing, though, is the trouble it has cost him to go about making copies. Strange madness! To tire himself more in losing his reputation than he could have in winning it.[77]

35 I, my lady, have not wished to reply, although others have done so without my knowing it until I saw some of their papers. Among them is one which I send you, because it is learned, and so that reading it may make up to you for part of the time I have wasted for you with what I write. If you, my lady, should wish me to do the opposite of what I had put before your judgment and opinion, then at the slightest motion of your wish my own view will yield, as is right—and that view, as I have told you, was to keep silent. For although St. John Chrysostom says, *Slanderers must be refuted, questioners taught,* I see that St. Gregory also says, *It is no lesser victory to bear with enemies than to conquer them*, and that patience conquers by enduring and triumphs by suffering. And among the pagan Romans, at the highest peak of their generals' glory, there was a custom. They entered in triumph over the nations, clothed in purple and crowned with laurel, their chariot drawn not by beasts but by the crowned heads of conquered kings. They were accompanied by the spoils of the riches of the whole world, their victorious army adorned with the insignia of its exploits, and they heard the people's applause in such honorable titles and names as Fathers of the Fatherland, Pillars of the Empire, Walls of Rome, Shelters of the Republic, and other glorious names. And at this supreme height of human glory and happiness, a soldier would go along saying aloud to

77 The critic's attack circulated anonymously in manuscript copies; an accusation whose author does not put his name to it carries no legal weight.

the victor, as if with his consent and by order of the Senate, "Remember that you are mortal; remember that you have this or that defect," without sparing the most shameful ones. So it happened at Caesar's triumph, when the lowest soldiers shouted in his ears: *Look out, Romans, we are bringing you the bald adulterer*.[78] This was done so that amid so much honor the victor should not grow vain, and so that the ballast of these insults might counterweigh the sails of so much applause, lest the ship of judgment founder among the winds of acclaim. If this, I say, was done by pagans with only the light of natural law, what great thing will it be for us Catholics, who have a commandment to love our enemies, to bear with them?

[36] For my part I can assure you that slanders have sometimes pained me, but they have never done me harm. For I consider anyone a great fool who, having the chance to earn merit, goes through the hardship and loses the merit. It is like those who will not resign themselves to dying, and die in the end anyway: their resistance serves not to spare them death but only to rob them of the merit of resignation, and to make a bad death of a death that could have been a good one. And so, my lady, I believe these things do more good than harm, and I consider greater the danger that applause poses to human frailty, which tends to appropriate what is not its own. One must be very careful and keep written on one's heart those words of the Apostle: *What do you have that you have not received? And if you have received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*[79] Let them serve as a shield to withstand the points of praise, for praises are lances: unless they are attributed to God, to whom they belong, they take our life, and make us thieves of God's honor and usurpers of the talents he entrusted to us and the gifts he lent us, of which we must give the strictest account. And so, my lady, I fear this more than that. For that, with a single simple act of patience, is turned to profit, whereas this requires many reflect-

78 Suetonius (*Life of Julius Caesar* 51) records the soldiers' ribald song at Caesar's Gallic triumph.

79 1 Corinthians 4:7.

ive acts of humility and self-knowledge if it is not to do harm.[80] And so I know it from my own case, and I acknowledge that knowing it is a special favor of God, so that I may conduct myself in both cases according to that saying of St. Augustine: *A friend who praises is not to be believed, any more than an enemy who disparages*. And yet I am such that most of the time I must spoil it, or mix it with such defects and imperfections that I corrupt what would have been good in itself. And so, in the little of mine that has been printed, neither my name nor even consent to print it has been my own decision, but the liberty of others, which is not under my control—as was the case with the printing of the Athenagoric Letter. Only some Exercises on the Incarnation and some Offerings on the Sorrows were printed with my approval, for public devotion, though without my name. I am sending some copies of them so that, if you think fit, you may distribute them among our sisters, the nuns of that holy community and of the rest of that city.[81] Of the Sorrows only one copy goes, because they have all been used up and I could find no more. I wrote them years ago solely for my sisters' devotion, and afterward they spread. Their subjects are as far beyond my lukewarmness as beyond my ignorance, and my only help in them was that they concern our great Queen—for I do not know what it is, but when one speaks of Most Holy Mary, the coldest heart catches fire. I would like, my venerable lady, to send you works worthy of your virtue and wisdom; but as the poet said: *Though strength be lacking, still the will deserves praise: / with this, I trust, the gods are content*.[82] If I write any other little things, they will always go in search of the sanctuary at your feet and the safety of your correction, for I have no other treasure with which to repay you. And in Seneca's opinion, whoever has begun to confer benefits has bound himself to continue them. So your own generosity will repay you, for only in this

80 The Spanish puns on *alabanzas* (praises) and *lanzas* (lances).
81 Her *Ejercicios devotos* for the feast of the Incarnation and *Ofrecimientos de los Dolores*, meditations on the Sorrows of the Virgin Mary.
82 Ovid, *Letters from Pontus* 3.4.79–80.

way can I be worthily freed of my debt without falling under that other saying of Seneca, *It is shameful to be outdone in benefits*. For it is the gallantry of a generous creditor to give the poor debtor the means to pay the debt.[83] So God did with the world, which was unable to pay: he gave it his own Son, so that it might offer him as worthy satisfaction. If the style of this letter, my venerable lady, has not been what is owed to you, I ask your pardon for its homely familiarity and lack of ceremony. Treating you as a veiled nun, my sister, I have forgotten the distance of your most illustrious person—which would not have happened had I seen you without the veil;[84] but you, with your good sense and kindness, will supply or amend the terms. And if the *vos* I have used seems incongruous to you—for it seemed to me that, given the reverence I owe you, "Your Reverence" is too little reverence—change it to whatever you think befits what you deserve. I have not dared to go beyond the limits of your style, nor to break through the margin of your modesty.[85] And keep me in your good graces, to obtain for me the grace of God; may the Lord grant you great increase and keep you, as I beg of him and as I need. From this convent of our father St. Jerome in Mexico City, the first day of the month of March, 1691.[86]

[37] I kiss your hand. Your most favored, *Juana Inés de la Cruz*.[87]

83 Both sayings come from Seneca's treatise *On Benefits*.

84 "Most illustrious" (*Ilustrísima*) was the style of a bishop: Sor Juana lets it be seen that she knows who is behind Sor Filotea's veil.

85 *Vos* was the plain, familiar form of address; "Vuestra Reverencia" (Your Reverence) was the formal title owed a prelate.

86 Sor Juana had professed there in 1669.

87 "B. V. M." abbreviates *besa vuestra mano*, "kisses your hand," the conventional close of a letter.