

48

*Respondiendo a un Caballero del Perú, que le envió unos Barros diciéndole que se volviese hombre*

Señor: para responderos  
todas las Musas se eximen,  
sin que haya, ni aun de limosna,  
una que ahora me dicte;

y siendo las nueve Hermanas  
madres del donaire y chiste,  
no hay, oyendo vuestros versos,  
una que chiste ni miste.

Apolo absorto se queda  
tan elevado de oírle,  
que para agujjar el Carro,  
es menester que le griten.

Para escucharlo, el Pegaso  
todo el aliento reprime,  
sin que mientras lo recitan  
tema nadie que relinche.

Pára, contra todo el orden,  
de sus cristales fluxiles  
los gorjeos Helicona,  
los murmurios Aganipe:

porque sus murmurios viendo,  
todas las Musas coligen  
que, de vuestros versos, no  
merecen ser aprendices.

Apolo suelta la vara  
con que los compases rige,  
porque reconoce, al veros,  
que injustamente preside.

Y así, el responderos tengo  
del todo por imposible,  
si compadecido acaso  
vos no tratáis de influirme.

Sed mi Apolo, y veréis que  
(como vuestra luz me anime)

48

*In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru, Who Sent Her Clay Vessels While Suggesting She Would Better Be a Man*

Kind Sir, while wishing to reply,  
my Muses all have taken leave,  
and none, even for charity,  
will aid me now I wish to speak;

and though we know these Sisters nine  
good mothers are of wit and jest,  
not one, once having heard your verse,  
will dare to jest at my behest.

The God Apollo listens, rapt,  
and races on, so high aloft  
that those who guide his Chariot  
must raise their voices to a shout.

To hear your lines, fleet Pegasus  
his lusty breathing will retain,  
that no one fear his thunderous neigh  
as your verses are declaimed.

Checking, against nature's order,  
altering crystalline watercourse,  
Helicon stays its gurgling water,  
Agannipe, her murmuring source:

for, having heard your murmuring,  
the Nine Daughters all concede,  
beside your verses they are wanting,  
unfit to study at your feet.

Apollo sets aside the wand  
that he employs to mark the beat,  
because, on seeing you, he knows  
he cannot justly take the lead.

And thus, acknowledge it I must,  
I cannot scribe the verses owed  
unless, perhaps, compassionate,  
keen inspiration you bestow.

Be my Apollo, and behold ))  
(as your light illuminates me))

mi lira sonante escuchan  
los dos opuestos confines.

Mas ¡oh cuánto poderosa  
es la invocación humilde,  
pues ya, en nuevo aliento, el pecho  
nuevo espíritu concibe!

De extraño ardor inflamado,  
hace que incendios respire;  
y como de Apolo, de  
Navarrete se reviste.

Nuevas sendas al discurso  
hace, que elevado pise,  
y en nuevos conceptos hace  
que él a sí mismo se admire.

Balbucente con la copia,  
la lengua torpe se aflige:  
mucho ve, y explica poco;  
mucho entiende, y poco dice.

Pensaréis que estoy burlando;  
pues mirad, que el que me asiste  
espíritu, no está a un  
dedo de que profetice.

Mas si es querer alabaros  
tan reservado imposible,  
que en vuestra pluma, no más,  
puede parecer factible,

¿de qué me sirve emprenderlo,  
de qué intentarlo me sirve,  
habiendo plumas que en agua  
sus escarmientos escriben?

Dejo ya vuestros elogios  
a que ellos solos se expliquen:  
pues los que en sí sólo caben,  
consigo sólo se miden.

Y paso a estimar aquellos  
hermosamente sutiles  
Búcaros, en quien el Arte  
hace al apetito brindis:

how my lyre will then be heard  
the length and breadth of land and sea.

Though humble, oh, how powerful  
my invocation's consequence,  
I find new valor in my breast,  
new spirit given utterance!

Ignited with unfamiliar fervor,  
my pen bursting into flame,  
while giving due to famed Apollo  
I honor Navarrete's name.

Traveling where none has trod,  
expression rises to new heights,  
and, reveling in new invention,  
finds in itself supreme delight.

Stammering with such abundance  
my clumsy tongue is tied with pain:  
much is seen, but little spoken,  
some is known, but none explained.

You will think that I make mock;  
no, nothing further from the truth,  
to prophesy, my guiding spirit  
is lacking but a fine hair's breadth.

But if I am so little able  
to offer you sufficient praise,  
to form the kind of compliment  
that only your apt pen may phrase,

what serve me then to undertake it?  
to venture it, what good will serve?  
if mine be pens that write in water,  
recording lessons unobserved.

That they themselves elucidate,  
I now leave your eulogies:  
as none to their measure correspond,  
none can match them in degree,

and I turn to giving thanks  
for your fair gifts, most subtly made;  
Art lifts a toast to appetite  
in lovely Vessels of fragrant clay.

Barros en cuyo primor  
ostenta soberbio Chile,  
que no es la plata, no el oro,  
lo que tiene más plausible,  
pues por tan baja materia  
hace que se desestimen  
doradas Copas que néctar  
en sagradas mesas sirven.

Bésoos las manos por ellos,  
que es cierto que tanto filis  
tienen los Barros, que juzgo  
que sois vos quien los hicisteis.

Y en el consejo que dais,  
yo os prometo recibirle  
y hacerme fuerza, aunque juzgo  
que no hay fuerzas que entarquinien:

porque acá Sálmacis falta,  
en cuyos cristales dicen  
que hay no sé qué virtud de  
dar alientos varoniles.

Yo no entiendo de esas cosas;  
sólo sé que aquí me vine  
porque, si es que soy mujer,  
ninguno lo verifique.

Y también sé que, en latín,  
sólo a las casadas dicen  
*úxor*, o mujer, y que  
es común de dos lo Virgin.

Con que a mí no es bien mirado  
que como a mujer me miren,  
pues no soy mujer que a alguno  
de mujer pueda servirle;

y sólo sé que mi cuerpo,  
sin que a uno u otro se incline,  
es neutro, o abstracto, cuanto  
sólo el Alma deposite.

Y dejando esta cuestión  
para que otros la ventilen,

Earthenware, so exquisite  
that Chile properly is proud,  
though it is not gold or silver  
that gives your gift its wide renown

but, rather, from such lowly matter  
forms emerge that put to shame  
the brimming Goblets made of gold  
from which Gods their nectar drained.

Kiss, I beg, the hands that made them,  
though judging by the Vessels' charm  
—such grace can surely leave no doubt—  
yours were the hands that gave them form.

As for the counsel that you offer,  
I promise you, I will attend  
with all my strength, although I judge  
no strength on earth can en-Tarquin:

for here we have no Salmacis,  
whose crystal water, so they tell,  
to nurture masculinity  
possesses powers unexcelled.

I have no knowledge of these things,  
except that I came to this place  
so that, if true that I am female,  
none substantiate that state.

I know, too, that they were wont  
to call wife, or woman, in the Latin  
*úxor*, only those who wed,  
though wife or woman might be virgin.

So in my case, it is not seemly  
that I be viewed as feminine,  
as I will never be a woman  
who may as woman serve a man.

I know only that my body,  
not to either state inclined,  
is neuter, abstract, guardian  
of only what my Soul consigns.

Let us renounce this argument,  
let others, if they will, debate;

porque en lo que es bien que ignore,  
no es razón que sutilice  
generoso Perúano  
que os lamentáis de infelice,  
¿que Lima es la que dejasteis,  
si acá la *lima* os trajisteis?

Bien sabéis la ley de Atenas,  
con que desterró a Aristides:  
que aun en lo bueno, es delito  
el que se singularice.

Por bueno lo desterraron,  
y a otros varones insignes;  
porque el exceder a todos,  
es delito irremisible.

El que a todos se aventaja,  
fuerza es que a todos incite  
a envidia, pues el lucir  
a todos juntos impide.

Al paso que la alabanza  
a uno para blanco elige,  
a ese mismo paso trata  
la envidia de perseguirle.

A vos de Perú os destierran  
y nuestra Patria os admite,  
porque nos da el Cielo acá  
la dicha que allá despiden.

Bien es que vuestro talento  
diversos climas habite:  
que los que nacen tan grandes,  
no sólo para sí viven.

some matters better left unknown  
no reason can illuminate.

Generous gentleman from Peru,  
proclaiming such unhappiness,  
did you leave Lima any art,  
given the art you brought to us?

You must know that law of Athens  
by which Aristides was expelled:  
it seems that, even if for good,  
it is forbidden to excel.

He was expelled for being good,  
and other famous men as well;  
because to tower over all  
is truly unforgiveable.

He who always leads his peers  
will by necessity invite  
malicious envy, as his fame  
will rob all others of the light.

To the degree that one is chosen  
as the target for acclaim,  
to that same measure, envy trails  
in close pursuit, with perfect aim.

Now you are banished from Peru  
and welcomed in my Native Land,  
we see the Heavens grant to us  
the blessing that Peru declined.

But it is well that such great talent  
live in many different zones,  
for those who are with greatness born  
should live not for themselves alone.

POEMS, PROTEST,  
AND A DREAM

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SELECTED WRITINGS

SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

TRANSLATED WITH NOTES BY  
MARGARET SAYERS PEDEN  
INTRODUCTION BY ILAN STAVANS



PENGUIN BOOKS