

*RESPONSE of the POET*

TO THE VERY EMINENT  
SOR FILOTEA DE LA CRUZ



*Very eminent lady, my señora:*

Neither my will nor scant health nor reasonable apprehension has delayed my response for so many days. Is it any surprise that my dull pen stumbled over two impossibilities at its first step. The first (and for me the more severe) is how to respond to your most learned, most prudent, most saintly, and most loving letter. For if the Angelic Doctor of the Schools, Saint Thomas, when questioned regarding his silence in the presence of Albertus Magnus, his teacher, replied that he was silent because he could find nothing to say worthy of Albertus, with how much more reason should I be silent, not, like the saint, out of humility, but because in reality, I know nothing worthy of you. The second impossibility is how to thank you for the favor, as unwarranted as it was unexpected, of having my rough scribblings printed; a good turn so immeasurable that it surpasses the most ambitious hope and most fantastic desire, which could find no place, even as a rational concept, in my thoughts; in short, it is of such magnitude that it not only cannot be reduced to the limits of words but exceeds the capacity of gratitude, as much for its dimensions as for how unforeseen it was, for as

Quintilian said: *Hopes give rise to the lesser glory, benefits to the greater.* So much so that they silence the beneficiary.

When the happily barren, only to be made miraculously fruitful, mother of the Baptist saw so magnificent a visitor as the Mother of the Word in her house, her understanding became clouded and her speech failed, and so instead of thanks she burst into doubts and questions: *Et unde hoc mihi?* From whence comes such a thing to me? The same occurred to Saul when he found himself elected and anointed king of Israel: *Am I not a son of Jemini of the least tribe of Israel, and my kindred the last among all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Wherefore then hast thou spoken this word to me?*<sup>1</sup> And so say I: from whence, illustrious señora, from whence comes so great a favor to me? Am I by chance anything more than a poor nun, the most insignificant creature in the world and the least worthy of your attention? *Wherefore then speakest thou so to me? From whence comes such a thing to me?*

To the first impossibility I can respond only that I am unworthy of your eyes, and to the second I cannot respond with anything other than exclamations, not thanks, saying that I am not capable of offering you even the smallest portion of the gratitude I owe you. It is not false modesty, señora, but the candid truth of all my soul, that when the letter your eminence

1 1 Samuel 9:21 (from the Douay-Rheims English version of the Latin Vulgate Bible, translated by St. Jerome and cited by Sor Juana; abbreviated as D-R). All other biblical citations in this letter refer to the King James Version.

called *Atenagórica*<sup>2</sup> reached me, I burst (although this does not come easily to me) into tears of confusion, because it seemed that your favor was nothing more than a reproach from God for how poorly I meet His expectations; while He corrects others with punishments, He wants to reduce me by means of benefits. A special favor, for which I know I am in His debt, as I am for other infinite benefits from His immense kindness, but also a special mode of shaming and confusing me: for it is a more exquisite method of punishment to have me, with my knowledge, serve as the judge who sentences and condemns my own ingratitude. When I ponder this, here in solitude, I often say: Lord may You be blessed, for You not only did not wish any other creature to judge me, and did not give me that responsibility either, but kept it for Yourself and freed me from me and the sentence I would have given myself—which, compelled by my own knowledge, could not be less than condemnation—and reserved that for Your mercy, because You love me more than I can love myself.

Señora, forgive the digression that the power of truth demanded of me, and if I must confess the whole truth, this is also a search for havens to escape the difficulty of responding, and I almost decided to leave everything in silence, but since this is negative, although it explains a great deal with the emphasis on not explaining, it is necessary to add a brief explanation so that what one wishes the silence to say is

2 It is assumed that "worthy of Athena" is the translation.

understood; if not, the silence will say nothing, because that is its proper occupation: saying nothing. The sacred chosen vessel was carried away to the third heaven, and having seen the arcane secrets of God, the text says: *He . . . heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter.*<sup>3</sup> It does not say what he saw but says that he cannot say; and so it is necessary at least to say that those things that cannot be said cannot be said, so it is understood that being silent does not mean having nothing to say, but that the great deal there is to say cannot be said in words. Saint John says that if all the miracles performed by Our Redeemer were to be written down, the entire world could not hold the books; and Vieira states that the Evangelist says more in just this passage than in everything else he wrote; the Lusitanian Phoenix speaks very well (but when does he not speak well, even when he does not speak well?), because here Saint John says everything he did not say and expressed what he did not express. And I, señora, will respond only that I do not know how to respond, will only give thanks, saying I am not capable of giving thanks to you, and will say, as a brief explanation of what I leave to silence, that only with the confidence of a favored woman and the benefits of an honored one can I dare speak to your excellency. If this is foolishness, forgive it, for it is a jewel of good fortune, and in it I will provide more material for your kindness, and you will give greater form to my gratitude.

3 2 Corinthians 12:4 (D-R).

Because he stammered, Moses did not think he was worthy to speak to the Pharaoh, and afterward, finding himself so favored by God fills him with so much courage that he not only speaks to God Himself but dares ask Him for impossibilities: *Shew me thy face.*<sup>4</sup> And I too, señora, no longer think impossible what I wrote at the beginning, in view of how you favor me; because the person who had the letter printed without my knowledge, who gave it a title and paid for it, who honored it so greatly (since it is entirely unworthy both for its own sake and the sake of its author), what will she not do, what will she not pardon, what will she cease doing, and what will she cease pardoning? And so, under the assumption that I speak with the safe-conduct of your favors and under the protection of your kindness, and your having, like another Ahasuerus, given me the tip of the golden scepter of your affection to kiss as a sign of granting me benevolent license to speak<sup>5</sup> and propound in your illustrious presence, I say that I receive in my soul your most saintly admonition to turn my studies to sacred books, which although this letter comes in the guise of advice will have for me the substance of a precept, with the not insignificant consolation that even earlier it seems my obedience foresaw your pastoral suggestion, as well as your guidance, inferred from the subject and proofs of the same letter. I know very well that your most sage warn-

4 Exodus 33:13 (D-R).

5 This is how Ahasuerus gave Esther permission to speak, in Esther 5:2.



ing is not directed at it but at how much you have seen of the human affairs I have written about; and so what I have said is only to satisfy you with regard to the lack of application you have inferred (and rightly so) from other writings of mine. And speaking more specifically I confess, with the candor that is owed you and with the truth and clarity that in me are always natural and customary, that my not having written a great deal about sacred matters has been due not to defiance or lack of application but to an abundance of the fear and reverence owed to those sacred letters, for whose comprehension I know myself highly incapable and for whose handling I am highly unworthy; resounding always in my ears, with no small horror, is the Lord's warning and prohibition to sinners like me: *Why dost thou declare my justices, and take my covenant in thy mouth?*<sup>6</sup> This question, and seeing that even learned men are forbidden to read the Song of Solomon and even Genesis before the age of thirty: the latter because of its obscurity, the former so that imprudent youth will not use the sweetness of those nuptial songs as an excuse to alter their meaning to carnal love. My great father Saint Jerome confirms this, ordering that it be the last book studied, for the same reason: At the end one may read, without danger, the Song of Songs; for if it is read at the beginning, when one does not understand the epithalamium to the spiritual marriage

6 Psalm 49:16 (D-R).

beneath the carnal words, one may suffer harm;<sup>7</sup> and Seneca says: In the early years, faith is not bright.<sup>8</sup> Then how would I dare hold it in my unworthy hands, when it is in conflict with my sex, my age, and especially, my customs? And so I confess that often this fear has removed the pen from my hand and made subjects withdraw into the same understanding from which they wished to emerge; this difficulty was not encountered in profane subjects, for a heresy against art is punished not by the Holy Office but by the prudent with laughter and the critics with condemnation; and this, just or unjust, there is no reason to fear it, for one can still take Communion and hear Mass and therefore it concerns me very little or not at all; because according to the same opinion of those who cast aspersions, I have no obligation to know and no aptitude for being correct; therefore, if I err there is no blame and no discredit. There is no blame because I have no obligation; there is no discredit because I have no possibility of being correct, and no one is obliged to undertake impossible things. And, truly, I have never written except reluctantly, when I was forced to, and only to please others; not only with no gratification but with positive repugnance, for I have never judged myself to possess the abundance of letters and intelligence demanded by the obligation of one who writes; and so my usual reply to those who urge me to write, especially if the

7 St. Jerome, *To Leta, Upon the Education of Her Daughter* (written c. 403 CE).

8 Seneca, *De beneficiis*.

subject is sacred: "What understanding, what studies, what materials, what rudimentary knowledge do I possess for this other than some superficial nonsense? Leave this for someone who understands it, for I wish no quarrel with the Holy Office, for I am ignorant and terrified of stating an offensive proposition or twisting the genuine significance of some passage. I do not study to write, much less to teach (which would be excessive pride in me), but only to see whether by studying I will be less ignorant." This is how I respond and how I feel.

Writing has never been by my own volition but at the behest of others; for I could truthfully say to them: *Ye have compelled me.*<sup>9</sup> A truth I will not deny (one, because it is widely known, and two, because even if used against me, God has favored me with a great love of the truth) is that ever since the first light of reason struck me, my inclination toward letters has been so strong and powerful that the reprimands of others—I have had many—or my own reflections—I have engaged in more than a few—have not sufficed to make me abandon this natural impulse that God placed in me: His Majesty knows why and to what end; and He knows I have asked Him to dim the light of my understanding, leaving only enough for me to obey His Law, for anything else is too much in a woman, according to some; there are even those who say it does harm. Almighty God knows too that when I did not obtain this, I attempted to

bury my understanding along with my name and sacrifice it to the One who gave it to me; for no other reason did I enter a convent, although the spiritual exercises and companionship of a community were incompatible with the freedom and quiet my studious intentions demanded; and afterward, in the community, the Lord knows, and in the world only the one who had to know, how I attempted to hide my name but was not permitted to, for it was said it was a temptation; and it would have been. If I could pay you, señora, something of what I owe you, I believe I would pay you in full by telling you this, for I have never spoken of it except to the one who had to hear it. But having opened wide the doors of my heart to you, revealing its deepest secrets, I want you to find my confidence worthy of what I owe to your illustrious person and excessive favors.

# I

Continuing the narration of my inclination, about which I want to give you a complete account, I say that before I was three years old my mother sent an older sister of mine to learn to read in one of the primary schools for girls called "friends," and, led by affection and mischief, I followed after her; and seeing that she was being taught a lesson, I was so set ablaze by the desire to know how to read that in the belief I was deceiving her, I told the teacher my mother wanted her to give me a lesson too. She



did not believe it, because it was not believable, but to go along with the joke, she taught me. I continued to go and she continued to teach me, in earnest now, because with experience she realized the truth; and I learned to read in so short a time that I already knew how when my mother found out, for the teacher hid it from her in order to give her complete gratification and receive her reward at the same time; and I kept silent believing I would be whipped for having done this without her knowledge. The woman who taught me is still alive (may God keep her), and she can testify to this.

*cheese*  
I remember at this time, my appetite being what is usual at that age, I abstained from eating cheese because I had heard it made people stupid, and my desire to learn was stronger in me than the desire to eat, despite this being so powerful in children. Later, when I was six or seven years old and already knew how to read and write, along with all the other skills pertaining to sewing and needlework learned by women, I heard there was a university and schools in Mexico City where sciences were studied; as soon as I heard this I began to pester my mother with insistent, inopportune pleas that she send me, dressed as a boy, to the home of some relatives she had in Mexico City, so I could study and attend classes at the university; she refused, and rightly so, but I satisfied my desire by reading many different books owned by my grandfather, and there were not enough punishments and reprimands to stop me, so that

when I came to Mexico City, people were surprised not so much by my intelligence as by my memory and the knowledge I possessed at an age when it seemed I had barely had enough time to learn to speak.

*hair*  
I began to learn Latin and believe I had fewer than twenty lessons; my seriousness was so intense that since the natural adornment of hair is so admired in women—especially in the flower of one's youth—I would cut off four to six inches, first measuring how long it was and then imposing on myself the rule that if, when it had grown back, I did not know whatever I had proposed to learn while it was growing, I would cut it again as a punishment for my stupidity. And when it grew back and I did not know what I had determined to learn, because my hair grew quickly and I learned slowly, then in fact I did cut it as punishment for my stupidity, for it did not seem right for my head to be dressed in hair when it was so bare of knowledge, which was a more desirable adornment. I entered the convent although I knew the situation had certain characteristics (I speak of secondary qualities, not formal ones) incompatible with my character, but considering the total antipathy I had toward matrimony, the convent was the least disproportionate and most honorable decision I could make to provide the certainty I desired for my salvation, and the first (and in the end the most important) obstacle to overcome was to relinquish all the minor defects in my character, such as wanting to live alone, and not wanting any obligatory occupation

*thinking*

that would limit the freedom of my studies, or the noise of a community that would interfere with the tranquil silence of my books. These made me hesitate somewhat in my determination, until learned persons enlightened me, saying they were a temptation, which I overcame with Divine Grace and entered into the state I so unworthily am in now. I thought I would flee myself, but I, poor wretch, brought myself with me as well as this inclination, my greatest enemy (I cannot determine whether Heaven gave it to me as a gift or a punishment), for when it was dimmed or interfered with by the many spiritual exercises present in the religious life, it exploded in me like gunpowder, proof in my own person that privation is the cause of appetite.

*no teacher*  
I returned to (no, I am wrong, for I never stopped): I mean to say I continued my studious effort (which for me was repose whenever I had time away from my obligations) to read and read some more, to study and study some more, with no teacher other than the books themselves. I learned how difficult it is to study those soulless characters without the living voice and explanations of a teacher; yet I gladly endured all this work for the sake of my love of letters. Oh, if it had only been for the sake of my love of God, which is the correct love, how meritorious it would have been! I did attempt to elevate it as much as I could and turn it to His service, because the goal to which I aspired was the study of theology, for, being Catholic, it seemed a foolish lack in me not to know everything that can be learned in

this life, by natural means, about the Divine Mysteries; and being a nun and not a layperson, I should profess vows to letters by means of my ecclesiastical state, and even more so, as a daughter of a Saint Jerome and a Saint Paula, for it seemed a deterioration if such learned parents produced an idiot child. I proposed this to myself and it seemed correct, if it was not (and this is most likely) flattery and applause of my own inclination, its enjoyment being proposed as an obligation.

In this way I proceeded, always directing the steps of my study to the summit of sacred theology, as I have said; and to reach it, I thought it necessary to ascend by the steps of human sciences and arts, because how is one to understand the style of the queen of sciences without knowing that of the handmaidens? How, without logic, was I to know the general and particular methods used in the writing of Holy Scripture? How, without rhetoric, would I understand its figures, tropes, and locutions? How, without physics, comprehend the many inherent questions concerning the nature of the animals used for sacrifices, in which so many stated subjects, as well as many others that are undeclared, are symbolized? How to know whether Saul healing at the sound of David's harp came from the virtue and natural power of music or the supernatural ability God wished to place in David? How, without arithmetic, understand so many computations of years, days, months, hours, and weeks as mysterious as those in Daniel, and others for whose deciphering



one must know the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers? How, without geometry, can one measure the Holy Ark of the Covenant and the holy city of Jerusalem, whose mysterious measurements form a cube with all its dimensions, a marvelous proportional distribution of all its parts? How, without architecture, fathom the great temple of Solomon, where God Himself was the artificer, conceiving the proportion and design, and the wise king merely the overseer who executed it; where there was no base without a mystery, no column without a symbol, no cornice without an allusion, no architrave without a meaning, and so on in all its parts, so that even the smallest fillet was placed not for the service and complement of art alone but to symbolize greater things? How, without great knowledge of the rules and parts that constitute history, can the historical books be understood? Those recapitulations in which what happened earlier often is placed later in the narration and seems to have occurred afterward? How, without great familiarity with both kinds of law, can one apprehend the legal books? How, without great erudition, approach so many matters of profane history mentioned in Holy Scripture, so many Gentile customs, so many rites, so many ways of speaking? How, without many rules and much reading of the holy fathers, can one grasp the obscure expression of the prophets? And without being very expert in music, how are we to understand the musical proportions and their beauty found in so many places, especially in the petition of Abraham to

God on behalf of the cities,<sup>10</sup> that He spare them if He found fifty righteous men, and from this number he went down to forty-five, which is a sesquinona [a minor whole tone or minor second], going from *mi* to *re*; and from here to forty, which is a sesquioctava [a major whole tone or major second], going from *re* to *ut* [modern *do*];<sup>11</sup> from here to thirty which is a sesquitertia, a diatessaron [a perfect fourth]; from here to twenty, which is the sesquialtera proportion, a diapente [a perfect fifth]; from here to ten, which is the dupla, a diapason [an octave]; and since there are no other harmonic intervals, he went no further? Well, how could one understand this without music? In the Book of Job, God says: *Shalt thou be able to join together the shining stars the Pleiades, or canst thou stop the turning about of Arcturus? Canst*

<sup>10</sup> See Genesis 28:24–32.

<sup>11</sup> Sor Juana apparently erred, or the text has been corrupted, when she indicated that the sesquioctava was from *re* to *mi*, the same illustration used for the sesquinona. This has been corrected to “from *re* to *ut*.” The sesquinona and sesquioctava are two different types of the interval now known as a whole tone or second. There are no modern equivalents to these two kinds of whole tone. Our thanks to Professor Mario A. Ortiz, Catholic University of America, for his invaluable assistance in clarifying the musical terminology and the Pythagorean concepts presented in this section.

As indicated by Cecil Adkins, “Monochord,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, accessed October 31, 2013, [www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18973/](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18973/), “The Pythagorean concept of division by proportions is based on the relationship of the harmonic and arithmetic means as they are represented by the numbers 6, 8, 9, and 12. The ratio 12:6 produces the octave; 9:6 and 12:8, the 5th; 8:6 and 12:9, the 4th; and 9:8, the major 2nd. Reduced to their lowest terms these ratios are dupla (12:1), sesquialtera (3:2), sesquitertia (4:3) and sesquioctava (9:8).”

*thou bring forth the day star in its time and make the evening star to rise upon the children of the earth?*<sup>12</sup> The terms, without knowledge of astronomy, would be impossible to comprehend. And not only these noble sciences, but there is no mechanical art that is not mentioned. In short, it is the book that encompasses all books, and the science that includes all sciences, which are useful for its understanding: even after learning all of them (which clearly is not easy, or even possible), another consideration demands more than all that has been said, and that is constant prayer and purity in one's life, in order to implore God for the purification of spirit and enlightenment of mind necessary for comprehending these lofty matters; if this is lacking, the rest is useless.

The Church says these words regarding the angelic doctor Saint Thomas: When he read the most difficult passages of Holy Scripture, he combined fasting with prayer. And he would say to his companion, Brother Reginald, that all he knew was not due to study or his own labor, but that he had received it from God.<sup>13</sup> And I, so distant from virtue and from letters, how was I to have the courage to write? Therefore, having attained a few elementary skills, I continually studied a variety of subjects, not having an inclination toward one in particular but toward all of them in general; as a consequence, having studied some more than

<sup>12</sup> Job 38:31–32 (D-R).

<sup>13</sup> Roman Breviary, Office of the Feast of St. Thomas [Aquinas], March 7, Fifth Lesson.

others has not been by choice but because, by chance, I had access to more books about those subjects, which created the preference more than any decision of mine. And since I had no special interest that moved me, and no time limit that restricted my continuing to study one subject because of the demands of formal classes, I could study a variety of subjects or abandon some for others, although I did observe a certain order, for some I called study and others diversion, and with these I rested from the first, with the result that I have studied many subjects and know nothing, because some have interfered with my learning others. True, I say this regarding the practical aspect of those subjects that have one, because it is obvious that while one moves a pen, the compass does nothing, and while one plays the harp, the organ is silent, and so on; because since a great deal of physical practice is necessary to acquire a practical skill, the person who is divided among various exercises can never achieve perfection; but the opposite happens in formal and speculative areas, and I would like to persuade everyone with my experience that this not only does not interfere but helps, for one subject illuminates and opens a path in another by means of variations and hidden connections—placed in this universal chain by the wisdom of its Author—so that it seems they correspond and are joined with admirable unity and harmony. It is the chain the ancients imagined issuing from the mouth of Jupiter, where all things hung linked to all other things. Reverend Father Athanasius



Kircher

Kircher demonstrates this in his curious book *De Magnete*. All things emanate from God, Who is at once the center and circumference from which all created lines emerge and where they end.

As for me, I can state that what I do not understand in an author from one discipline I usually can understand in a different author from another discipline that seems quite distant from the first; and in their explanations, these authors offer metaphorical examples from other arts, as when logicians say that the mean is to the terms as a measurement is to two distant bodies, in order to determine whether they are equal; and that the statement of a logician moves, like a straight line, along the shortest path, while that of a rhetorician follows, like a curve, the longest, but both travel to the same point; and when it is said that expositors are like an open hand and scholastics like a closed fist. This is not an excuse for having studied a diversity of subjects, nor do I offer it as such, for these subjects contribute to one another, but my not having benefitted from them has been the fault of my ineptitude and the weakness in my understanding, not of their variety.

## II

What might absolve me is the immense amount of work caused by lacking not only a teacher but other students with whom to confer and practice what I studied, having

a mute book for a teacher and an insentient inkwell for a fellow student; and instead of explanation and practice, countless obstacles, not only those of my religious obligations (and we already know what a useful and profitable use of time these are) but those other things that are inevitable in a community: for instance, when I am reading and in the adjoining cell they take a notion to play their instruments and sing; when I am studying and two maidservants have a quarrel and come to have me judge their dispute; when I am writing and a friend comes to visit, doing me a disservice with nothing but good intentions, and it is necessary not only to accept the intrusion but be grateful for the damage done. And this happens constantly, because since the times I devote to my studies are those not dedicated to the routine duties of the community, those same times are moments of leisure for the other sisters who interrupt me; and only those who have experienced communal life know how true this is, for only the strength of my vocation and the great love that exists among me and my beloved sisters can make my disposition agreeable, and since love is harmony, in it there are no polar opposites.

I do confess that my work has been interminable, which means I cannot say what I enviously hear others say: that they have never had a great yearning for knowledge. How fortunate for them! For me, not the knowing (for I still know nothing) but only the desire to know has been so great that I could say with my father Saint Jerome (although

*This man was also with him.*<sup>29</sup> He loved wisdom, carried it in his heart, followed after it, valued being a follower and lover of wisdom; and although he was so *a longe* [far off] that he did not understand or reach it, it was enough to incur its torments. There was always a foreign soldier to cause him distress, a maidservant to trouble him. I confess I find myself very far from the boundaries of wisdom and have wanted to follow it, although *a longe*. Yet this has brought me closer to the fire of persecution, the crucible of torment, to the extent that some have requested that I be forbidden to study.

*skipped studying*  
This once was achieved by a very saintly, very ingenuous mother superior who believed that study was a matter for the Inquisition and ordered me to stop. I obeyed (for the three months her power to command lasted) in that I did not pick up a book, but not studying at all, which is not in my power, I could not do, because although I did not study books, I studied all the things God created, and these were my letters, and my book was the entire mechanism of the universe. I saw nothing without reflecting on it, heard nothing without considering it, even the smallest material things, for there is no creature, no matter how low, in which one does not recognize *me fecit Deus*,<sup>30</sup> none that does not astonish the understanding, if one considers

<sup>29</sup> Luke 22:56.

<sup>30</sup> God made me.

it as one should. And so, I repeat, I looked at and admired everything; as a consequence, even the people to whom I spoke, and the things they said to me, gave rise to a thousand considerations: What is the origin of the varieties of intelligence and wit, since we are all one species? What could be the temperaments and hidden qualities that caused them? If I saw a figure, I would combine the proportion of its lines and measure it with my understanding and reduce it to other, different figures. I would walk sometimes in the front part of our dormitory (which is a very spacious room) and observe that since the lines of its two sides were parallel and the ceiling level, the eye made it seem that its lines inclined toward each other and the ceiling was lower at a distance than nearby, and from this I inferred that visual lines run straight, not parallel, but form a pyramidal shape instead. And I wondered whether this might be the reason the ancients were obliged to doubt the world was round. Because although it seems so, our sight could deceive us, showing concavities where there might not be any.

I notice everything in this manner and always have and have no control over it; in fact it tends to annoy me, for it wearies my head; I thought this, and composing verses, happened to everyone, until experience showed me the contrary; and this is so much my character or custom that I see nothing without considering it further. Two little girls were playing with a top in my presence, and no sooner did I see the movement and shape than I began, with this mad-

*3*



ness of mine, to consider the easy motion of the spherical shape and how the already transmitted impulse could last, independent of its cause, for far from the hand of the little girl, which was the motivating cause, the top still danced; not content with this, I had some flour brought in and sifted, so that as the top danced on top of it, I could learn whether the circles described by its movement were perfect or not; and I found that they were merely spiral lines that lost their circular nature as the impulse diminished. Some other girls were playing jackstraws (which is the most frivolous of children's games); I began to contemplate the figures they formed, and seeing that by chance three fell into a triangle, I began to connect one to the other, recalling that some say this was the shape of the mysterious ring of Solomon, which had distant indications and representations of the Holy Trinity, allowing him to perform countless miracles and marvels; and it is said that the harp of David had the same shape, and for that reason Saul was healed at its sound; harps in our day still have almost the same shape.

And what could I tell you, señora, about the natural secrets I have discovered when cooking? Seeing that an egg sets and fries in butter or oil but falls apart in syrup; seeing that for sugar to remain liquid it is enough to add a very small amount of water in which a quince or other bitter fruit has been placed; seeing that the yolk and the white of the same egg are so different that each mixed with sugar is different from both mixed with sugar. I do not mean to

tire you with these inconsequentialities, which I mention only to give you a complete view of my nature, and which I believe will cause you to laugh; but, señora, what can we women know but kitchen philosophies? As Lupercio Leonardo<sup>31</sup> so wisely said, one can philosophize very well and prepare supper. And seeing these minor details, I say that if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more. Returning to my continual cogitation, I repeat that this is so constant in me I do not need books; on one occasion, because of a serious stomach ailment, the doctors prohibited my studying; after a few days I suggested to them that it would be less harmful to allow me books, because my cogitations were so strong and vehement that they consumed more energy in a quarter of an hour than studying books did in four days; and so they were persuaded to allow me to read. And further, señora: not even my sleep was free of this continual movement of my imaginative faculty; rather, it tends to operate more freely and unencumbered, examining with greater clarity and tranquility the events of the day, arguing, and composing verses, and I could offer you a large catalogue of them and the arguments and delicate points I have formulated more successfully asleep than awake, but I put those aside in order not to weary you, for what I have said is enough for your intelligence and perspi-

<sup>31</sup> The citation should be attributed to Luperico's brother Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola, Satire I.

cacity to penetrate and see perfectly my entire nature, as well as the origin, means, and state of my studies.

If these, señora, are meritorious (I see them celebrated as such in men), they would not be so in me, because I act out of necessity. If they are blameworthy, for the same reason I believe I am not at fault; nonetheless, I always have so little confidence in myself that in this or anything else I do not trust my own judgment; and so I remit the decision to your sovereign talent, submitting to whatever sentence you may impose, without contradiction or opposition, for this has been no more than a simple narrative of my inclination toward letters.

### III

*catálogo*  
I confess as well that although it is true, as I have said, that I needed no books, yet the many I have read, in both divine and human letters, have not failed to help me. For I find Deborah issuing laws, both military and political, and governing a people that had many learned men. I find an exceedingly wise Queen of Sheba, so learned she dares to test with enigmas the wisdom of the greatest of wise men and is not rebuked for that reason; instead, because of it, she becomes judge of the unbelievers. I find numerous illustrious women: some adorned with the gift of prophecy, like Abigail; others, with the gift of persuasion, like Esther; others, with piety, like Rahab; others, with perseverance,

like Hannah, mother of Samuel, and countless others possessing all kinds of gifts and virtues.

If I turn to the Gentiles, I first encounter the Sibyls, chosen by God to prophesy the principal mysteries of our faith, in verses so learned and elegant they enthrall our admiration. I find a woman like Minerva, daughter of the foremost god Jupiter and mistress of all the knowledge of Athens, worshipped as goddess of the sciences. I find Polla Argentaria, who helped Lucan, her husband, write the great *Pharsalia*. I find the daughter of the divine Tiresias, more learned than her father. I find Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrenes, as wise as she was valiant. Arete, the most learned daughter of Aristippus. Nicostrata, creative in Latin letters and extremely erudite in Greek. Aspasia of Miletus, who taught philosophy and rhetoric and was the tutor of the philosopher Pericles. Hypatia, who taught astronomy and studied for many years in Alexandria. Leontion, a Greek woman who wrote arguments countering the philosopher Theophrastus, which convinced him. Jucia,<sup>32</sup> Corinna, Cornelia, in short, all the great number of women who deserved fame, whether as Greeks, muses, or pytho-nesses, for all of them were simply learned women, considered and celebrated and also venerated as such in antiquity. Not to mention countless others who fill the books, for I find the Egyptian Catherine studying and affecting all the

<sup>32</sup> Sor Juana may have meant Julia (Domna), an intellectual Roman empress.



wisdom of the wise men of Egypt. I find Gertrude reading, writing, and teaching. And for examples closer to home, I find a most holy mother of mine, Paula, learned in the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin languages and extremely skilled in interpreting Scripture. And none other than the great Saint Jerome scarcely thought himself worthy of being her chronicler, for with the lively thought and energetic exactitude he brings to his explanations, he says: If all the members of my body were tongues, they would not suffice to publish the wisdom and virtue of Paula. The widow Blaesilla deserved the same praise, as did the illustrious virgin Eustochium, both daughters of this saint; the second, for her knowledge, was called Prodigy of the World. Fabiola, a Roman woman, was also extremely learned in Holy Scripture. Proba Faltonia, another Roman, wrote an elegant book, a cento of selections from Virgil, on the mysteries of our Holy Faith. It is well known that our queen, Doña Isabel, the wife of Alfonso X,<sup>33</sup> wrote on astronomy. And many others whom I omit in order not to cite what others have said (a vice I have always despised), for in our day the great Christina Alexandra, Queen of Sweden, as learned as she is valiant and magnanimous, and the Most Honorable Ladies the Duchess of Aveiro and the Countess of Villaumbrosa are all flourishing.

<sup>33</sup> The wife of Alfonso X was Violante of Aragon, who did collaborate on Alfonso's astronomical treatises. Doña Isabel was the wife and queen of Ferdinand V.

The illustrious Doctor Arce (a professor of Scripture, eminent for his virtue and learning), in his *Studioso Bibliorum*, raises this question: Is it legitimate for women to dedicate themselves to the study of Holy Scripture and its interpretation? And he offers many judgments of saints that argue against this, in particular the statement of the Apostle: Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak,<sup>34</sup> et cetera. Then he offers other judgments, including one by the same Apostle in Titus: *The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness . . . teachers of good things*,<sup>35</sup> with interpretations of the holy fathers; and finally he prudently resolves that giving public lectures from a professor's chair and preaching from a pulpit are not legitimate for women, but that studying, writing, and teaching privately not only are legitimate but very advantageous and useful; it is obvious that this does not apply to all women but only to those whom God has favored with special virtue and prudence, who are mature and erudite and have the necessary talent and requisites for so sacred an occupation. And this is true not only for women, who are considered to be so incompetent, but for men as well, who for the simple fact of being men think they are wise: the interpretation of Scripture should be forbidden unless the men are very learned and

<sup>34</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:34.

<sup>35</sup> Titus 2:3.

virtuous, with tractable, well-inclined natures; I believe that doing otherwise has resulted in countless sectarians and has been at the root of countless heresies, for there are many who study but remain ignorant, especially those whose natures are arrogant, restless, proud, and inclined toward innovations in religion (which turns away from innovations); and so, in order to say what no one else has said, they are not content until they utter a heresy. About them the Holy Spirit declares: *For wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul.*<sup>36</sup> Knowledge does these men more harm than ignorance would. A wise man said that the man who does not know Latin is not a complete fool, but the one who does is qualified to be one. And I would like to add that a fool becomes perfect (if foolishness can reach perfection) by studying his bit of philosophy and theology and having some idea of languages, making him a fool in many sciences and many languages, because a great fool cannot be contained in his mother tongue alone.

These men, I repeat, are harmed by studying because it places a sword in the hands of a madman; being a noble instrument for defense, in his hands it means his death and the death of many others. This is what divine letters became in the hands of the wicked Pelagius and the perverse Arius, the wicked Luther, and the other heresiarchs like our Doctor (he was never ours and never a doctor) Cazalla, all of them

36 Wisdom 1:4 (D-R).

harmed by knowledge because, although it is the best nourishment and life of the soul, just as the better the food in an ill-tempered, ailing stomach, the more arid, fermented, and perverse the humors it creates, so it is with these evil men, for the more they study the worse the opinions they engender; their understanding is blocked by the very thing that should have nourished them, for they study a great deal and digest very little, not taking into account the limited vessel of their understanding. Regarding this the Apostle says: *For I say, by the grace that is given me, to all that are among you, not to be more wise than it behoveth to be wise, but to be wise unto sobriety, and according as God hath divided to everyone the measure of faith.*<sup>37</sup> And the truth is that the Apostle did not say this to women but to men; the *taceant*<sup>38</sup> is not only for women but for all those who are not very capable. My wanting to know as much as or more than Aristotle or Saint Augustine, if I do not have the aptitude of Saint Augustine or Aristotle, means that even if I study more than both of them, I not only will not succeed in my ambition, but the lack of proportion in my purpose will weaken and confuse the operation of my weak understanding.

Oh, if all of us—and I before anyone, for I am an ignorant woman—would take the measure of our talent before studying and (what is worse) writing with a voracious

37 Romans 12:3 (D-R).

38 Keep silence (see page 189, n. 34).



desire to equal and even surpass others, how little ambition would we have left and how many errors would we avoid and how many twisted intelligences would we not have in the world! And I place mine in first place, for if I knew as much as I should, I would not be writing this. And I insist I am doing so only to obey you, with so much misgiving that you owe me more for taking up my pen, having this fear, than you would if I had sent you more perfect works. It is good that this will be corrected by you; erase it, tear it up, and reprimand me, for I will value that more than all the vain applause others may offer me: *That just men shall correct me in mercy, and shall reprove me; but let not the oil of the sinner fatten my head.*<sup>39</sup>

And returning to our Arce, I say that he offers as confirmation of his opinion the words of my father Saint Jerome (*To Leta, Upon the Education of her Daughter*) where he says: Accustom her tongue while she is still young to the sweetness of the Psalms. Even the names through which she gradually will become accustomed to form her phrases should not be chosen by chance but selected and repeated with care; the prophets must be included, of course, and the Apostles as well, and all the Patriarchs beginning with Adam down to Matthew and Luke, so that as she practices other things she will be readying her memory for the future. Let your daily task be taken from the flower of the Scriptures. If the

39 Psalm 140:5 (D-R).

saint wanted a little girl who had barely begun to speak to be educated in this way, what would he want in his nuns and spiritual daughters? It is known very well in the above mentioned Eustochium and Fabiola and in Marcella, her sister Pacatula, and others whom the saint honors in his letters, exhorting them to this sacred exercise, as it is known in the cited letter where I noted that *reddat tibi pensum*, which affirms and agrees with the *bene docentes* of Saint Paul, for the *reddat tibi* of my great father makes it plain that the teacher of the little girl is to be Leta, her mother.

Oh, how much harm could be averted in our republic if older women were as learned as Leta and knew how to teach as Saint Paul and my father Saint Jerome advise! Since they do not, and given the extreme idleness in which our unfortunate women are left, if some parents wish to give their daughters more instruction than usual, necessity and the lack of learned older women obliges them to have male tutors teach their daughters how to read, write, count, play an instrument, and other skills, which results in a good amount of harm, as we see every day in lamentable examples of wayward associations, for over time, with close dealings and communication, what was thought impossible tends to become simple. For this reason many parents choose to leave their daughters unlettered and uneducated rather than expose them to so notable a danger as familiarity with men, which could be avoided if there were learned older women, as Saint Paul desires, and instruction would

be handed down from one female to another as occurs in the teaching of needlework and other customary skills.

For what disadvantage can there be in having an older woman learned in letters, whose conversation and customs are holy, directing the education of young girls? The alternative is allowing them to be lost through lack of instruction, or wishing to teach them by means as dangerous as male tutors, even when there is no more risk than the indecency of having a shy girl (who still blushes when her own father looks in her face) sit beside a strange man who will treat her with domestic familiarity and authoritative informality; the modesty required in dealings with men and their conversation is enough reason not to permit this kind of arrangement. I do not find that this form of instruction, when men teach women, can be without danger except in the severe tribunal of a confessional or the decent distance of pulpits or the remote learning from books, but not in immediate proximity. Everyone knows this is true; even so, it is allowed only because of the lack of educated older women; therefore, not having them does great harm. This should be considered by those who, attached to *Mulieres in Ecclesia taceant*, say that women learning and teaching is blasphemy, as if the Apostle himself had not said: *bene docentes*. Moreover, the prohibition came at a time when, as Eusebius indicates, in the early Church women would teach one another doctrine in the temples, and this sound caused some confusion when the Apostles preached; that is why

they were ordered to be silent, as occurs now, when one does not pray aloud while the preacher delivers his sermon.

There is no doubt that to understand many passages of divine letters, one needs to know a good deal about the history, customs, ceremonies, proverbs, and even modes of speech of the times when they were written in order to comprehend the references and allusions of certain locutions. *Rend your heart, and not your garments*,<sup>40</sup> is this not an allusion to the ceremony the Hebrews had of tearing their clothes as a sign of grief, as the evil high priest did when he said that Christ had blasphemed?<sup>41</sup> In many passages the Apostle writes of help for widows, and did they also not refer to the customs of those times? The passage about the strong woman: *Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land*,<sup>42</sup> does it not allude to the custom of holding the tribunal of judges at the gates of the cities? And *give your land to God*, did it not signify making a vow? *Hiemantes*, was this not the name given to public sinners, because they performed their penance in the open air, unlike others who repented in a covered passage? The complaint of Christ to the Pharisee regarding the lack of a kiss and the washing of his feet, was it not based on the custom the Jews had of doing these things? And countless

40 Joel 2:13.

41 Matthew 26:65: *Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy.*

42 Proverbs 31:23.

*Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*

SELECTED WORKS



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