

Classic Poetry Series

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz
- poems -

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Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz(1651 - 1695)

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was an exceptional seventeenth-century nun who set precedents for feminism long before the term or concept existed. Her "Respuesta" is a maverick work outlining the logical sense of women's education more than 200 years before Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Her poetry, meanwhile, states in bold language the potency of the feminine in both love and religion.

Juana Inés Ramirez was born out of wedlock to Isabel Ramirez and Manuel de Asbaje in a small village in Mexico, New Spain. Manuel soon abandoned the family, so mother and child spent a great deal of time with Juana's grandfather, Pedro Ramirez. It was in Pedro's book-filled house that Juana learned to read. (Girls of her time were rarely, if ever, formally educated.) The door to learning then burst open -- the young prodigy would embark upon a life shaped and shaken by intellectual inquiry. She quickly gained renown in society and became a lady-in-waiting in the court of the Spanish viceroy. Yet she soon left the court for the nunnery; practically speaking, this was the best way for an illegitimately born woman to secure the time and resources for scholarship.

But Sor Juana did not shut herself away in an ascetic cell. She started out as a novice in the Carmelite order, but the order's predilection for little sleep and self-flagellation repelled her after a few months. Eventually she found a sect that was more her speed as a lady of letters and a former courtier: the order of San Jerónimo gave her an entire suite of her own, complete with bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, library, and servant. Her library -- which held Mexico's largest book collection -- developed into a meeting-place for the intellectual elite. Those who frequented the salon included future viceroy Marquis de La Laguna and the Countess de Pareda, known to her intimates as Maria Luisa.

Maria Luisa and Sor Juana embarked on a passionate friendship that may have crossed the boundaries of the propriety of the day. In any case, it produced decidedly amorous poetry. Sor Juana wrote, "That you're a woman far away is no hindrance to my love: for the soul, as you well know, distance and sex don't count." Whether she was a lesbian by modern-day standards is unclear, and probably irrelevant. What is clear is that her poetry expresses a spiritual solidarity with women, a sublime affinity that transcends sex. That this solidarity excluded men is apparent in her anti-male work -- in "You Men," the accused are a sniveling bunch "adept at wrongly faulting womankind."

However, it was not the Sapphic content of her verses that upset Sor Juana's

contemporaries. Rather, she drew fire after a private letter criticizing a member of the clergy was published without her permission. When the Archbishop of Mexico tried to silence her, she wrote a defense entitled "La Respuesta." This letter is her defining work -- and the instrument of her downfall. Sor Juana turned around the logic used by the Church to justify her oppression and subverted it into a magnificent defense for women's intellectual rights and education. Though the letter's tone is superficially humble, Sor Juana forcefully insists that women have a natural right to the mind. Her use of biblical evidence to support her call for strong, educated women is downright clever -- and has earned her recognition for her rhetorical skills. Naturally, "La Respuesta" brought indignation from the Church and unwanted attention from the Inquisition. To save herself, Sor Juana was forced to stop writing and to give up her books. She died a nun's death in 1695, succumbing to illness while caring for the poor during an epidemic.

Arraignment Of The Men

Males perverse, schooled to condemn
Women by your witless laws,
Though forsooth you are prime cause
Of that which you blame in them:

If with unexampled care
You solicit their disdain,
Will your fair words ease their pain,
When you ruthless set the snare?

Their resistance you impugn,
Then maintain with gravity
That it was mere levity
Made you dare to importune.

What more elevating sight
Than of man with logic crass,
Who with hot breath fogs the glass,
Then laments it is not bright!

Scorn and favor, favor, scorn,
What you will, result the same,
Treat you ill, and earn your blame,
Love you well, be left forlorn.

Scant regard will she possess
Who with caution wends her way,—
Is held thankless for her "nay,"
And as wanton for her "yes."

What must be the rare caprice
Of the quarry you engage:
If she flees, she wakes your rage,
If she yields, her charms surcease.

Who shall bear the heavier blame,
When remorse the twain enthralls,
She, who for the asking, falls,
He who, asking, brings to shame?

Whose the guilt, where to begin,
Though both yield to passion's sway,
She who weakly sins for pay,
He who, strong, yet pays for Sin?

Then why stare ye, if we prove
That the guilt lies at your gate?
Either love those you create,
Or create those you can love.

To solicitation truce,—
Then, sire, with some show of right
You may mock the hapless plight
Or the creatures of your use!

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

I Approach And I Withdraw

(Español)

Me acerco y me retiro:
¿quién sino yo hallar puedo
a la ausencia en los ojos
la presencia en lo lejos?

Del desprecio de Filis,
infelice, me ausento.
¡Ay de aquel en quien es
aun pérdida el desprecio!

Tan atento la adoro
que, en el mal que padezco,
no siento sus rigores
tanto como el perderlos.

No pierdo, al partir, sólo
los bienes que poseo,
si en Filis, que no es mía,
pierdo lo que no pierdo.

¡Ay de quien un desdén
lograba tan atento,
que por no ser dolor
no se atrevió a ser premio!

Pues viendo, en mi destino,
preciso mi destierro,
me desdeñaba más
porque perdiera menos.

¡Ay! ¿Quién te enseñó, Filis,
tan primoroso medio:
vedar a los desdenes
el traje del afecto?

A vivir ignorado
de tus luces, me ausento
donde ni aun mi mal sirva

a tu desdén de obsequio.

(English)

I approach, and I withdraw:
who but I could find
absence in the eyes,
presence in what's far?

From the scorn of Phyllis,
now, alas, I must depart.
One is indeed unhappy
who misses even scorn!

So caring is my love
that my present distress
minds hard-heartedness less
than the thought of its loss.

Leaving, I lose more
than what is merely mine:
in Phyllis, never mine,
I lose what can't be lost.

Oh, pity the poor person
who aroused such kind disdain
that to avoid giving pain,
it would grant no favor!

For, seeing in my future
obligatory exile,
she disdained me the more,
that the loss might be less.

Oh, where did you discover
so neat a tactic, Phyllis:
denying to disdain
the garb of affection?

To live unobserved
by your eyes, I now go

where never pain of mine
need flatter your disdain.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

In Which She Satisfies A Fear With The Rhetoric Of Tears

This afternoon, my love, speaking to you
since I could see that in your face and walk
I failed in coming close to you with talk,
I wanted you to see my heart. Love, who
supported me in what I longed to do,
conquered the impossible to attain.
Amid my tears that were poured out by pain,
my heart became distilled, was broken through.
Enough, my love. Don't be so stiff. Don't let
maddening jealousies and arrogance
haunt you or let your quiet be upset
by foolish shadows: false signs of a man's
presence; for now you see my heart which met
your touch -- and so is shattered in your hands.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

My Divine Lysis

Espanol:

Divina Lysi mía:
perdona si me atrevo
a llamarte así, cuando
aun de ser tuya el nombre no merezco.

A esto, no osadía
es llamarte así, puesto
que a ti te sobran rayos,
si en mí pudiera haber atrevimientos.

Error es de la lengua,
que lo que dice imperio
del dueño, en el dominio,
parezcan posesiones en el siervo.

Mi rey, dice el vasallo;
mi cárcel, dice el preso;
y el más humilde esclavo,
sin agraviarlo, llama suyo al dueño.

Así, cuando yo mía
te llamo, no pretendo
que juzguen que eres mía,
sino sólo que yo ser tuya quiero.

Yo te vi; pero basta:
que a publicar incendios
basta apuntar la causa,
sin añadir la culpa del efecto.

Que mirarte tan alta,
no impide a mi denuedo;
que no hay deidad segura
al altivo volar del pensamiento.

Y aunque otras más merezcan,

en distancia del cielo
lo mismo dista el valle
más humilde que el monte más soberbio,

En fin, yo de adorarte
el delito confieso;
si quieres castigarme,
este mismo castigo será premio.

(English)

My divine Lysis:
do forgive my daring,
if so I address you,
unworthy though I am to be known as yours.

I cannot think it bold
to call you so, well knowing
you've ample thunderbolts
to shatter any overweening of mine.

It's the tongue that misspeaks
when what is called dominion--
I mean, the master's rule--
is made to seem possession by the slave.

The vassal says: my king;
my prison, the convict says;
and any humble slave
will call the master his without offense.

Thus, when I call you mine,
it's not that I expect
you'll be considered such--
only that I hope I may be yours.

I saw you-need more be said?
To broadcast a fire,
telling the cause suffices--
no need to apportion blame for the effect.

Seeing you so exalted
does not prevent my daring;
no god is ever secure
against the lofty flight of human thought.

There are women more deserving,
yet in distance from heaven
the humblest of valleys
seems no farther than the highest peak.

In sum, I must admit
to the crime of adoring you;
should you wish to punish me,
the very punishment will be reward.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

My Lady

(Español)

Perdite, señora, quiero
de mi silencio perdón,
si lo que ha sido atención
le hace parecer grosero.

Y no me podrás culpar
si hasta aquí mi proceder,
por ocuparse en querer,
se ha olvidado de explicar.

Que en mi amorosa pasión
no fue desuido, ni mengua,
quitar el uso a la lengua
por dárselo al corazón.

Ni de explicarme dejaba:
que, como la pasión mía
acá en el alma te vía,
acá en el alma te hablaba.

Y en esta idea notable
dichosamente vivía,
porque en mi mano tenía
el fingirte favorable.

Con traza tan peregrina
vivió mi esperanza vana,
pues te pudo hacer humana
concibiéndote divina.

¡Oh, cuán loca llegué a verme
en tus dichosos amores,
que, aun fingidos, tus favores
pudieron enloquecerme!

¡Oh, cómo, en tu sol hermoso
mi ardiente afecto encendido,
por cebarse en lo lucido,

olvidó lo peligroso!

Perdona, si atrevimiento
fue atreverme a tu ardor puro;
que no hay sagrado seguro
de culpas de pensamiento.

De esta manera engañaba
la loca esperanza mía,
y dentro de mí tenía
todo el bien que deseaba.

Mas ya tu precepto grave
rompe mi silencio mudo;
que él solamente ser pudo
de mi respeto la llave.

Y aunque el amar tu belleza
es delito sin disculpa
castígueseme la culpa
primero que la tibieza.

No quieras, pues, rigurosa,
que, estando ya declarada,
sea de veras desdichada
quien fue de burlas dichosa.

Si culpas mi desacato,
culpa también tu licencia;
que si es mala mi obediencia,
no fue justo tu mandato

Y si es culpable mi intento,
será mi afecto precito,
porque es amarte un delito
de que nunca me arrepiento.

Esto en mis afectos hallo,
y más, que explicar no sé;
mas tú, de lo que callé,
inferirás lo que callo.

My lady, I must implore
forgiveness for keeping still,
if what I meant as tribute
ran contrary to your will.

Please do not reproach me
if the course I have maintained
in the eagerness of my love
left my silence unexplained.

I love you with so much passion,
neither rudeness nor neglect
can explain why I tied my tongue,
yet left my heart unchecked.

The matter to me was simple:
love for you was so strong,
I could see you in my soul
and talk to you all day long.

With this idea in mind,
I lived in utter delight,
pretending my subterfuge
found favor in your sight.

In this strange, ingenious fashion,
I allowed the hope to be mine
that I still might see as human
what I really conceived as divine.

Oh, how mad I became
in my blissful love of you,
for even though feigned, your favor
made all my madness seem true!

How unwisely my ardent love,
which your glorious sun inflamed,
sought to feed upon your brightness,
though the risk of your fire was plain!

Forgive me if, thus emboldened,
I made bold with that sacred fire:
there's no sanctuary secure
when thought's transgressions conspire.

Thus it was I kept indulging
these foolhardy hopes of mine,
enjoying within myself
a happiness sublime.

But now, at your solemn bidding,
this silence I herewith suspend,
for your summons unlocks in me
a respect no time can end.

And, although loving your beauty
is a crime beyond repair,
rather the crime be chastised
than my fervor cease to dare.

With this confession in hand,
I pray, be less stern with me.
Do not condemn to distress
one who fancied bliss so free.

If you blame me for disrespect,
remember, you gave me leave;
thus, if obedience was wrong,
your commanding must be my reprieve.

Let my love be ever doomed
if guilty in its intent,
for loving you is a crime
of which I will never repent.

This much I descry in my feelings--
and more that I cannot explain;
but you, from what I've not said,
may infer what words won't contain.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

On The Death Of That Most Excellent Lady,

(Español)

Mueran contigo, Laura, pues moriste,
los afectos que en vano te desean,
los ojos a quien privas de que vean
hermosa luz que a un tiempo concediste.

Muera mi lira infausta en que influiste
ecos, que lamentables te vocean,
y hasta estos rasgos mal formados sean
lágrimas negras de mi pluma triste.

Muévase a compasión la misma muerte
que, precisa, no pudo perdonarte;
y lamente el amor su amarga suerte,

pues si antes, ambicioso de gozarte,
deseó tener ojos para verte,
ya le sirvieran sólo de llorarte.

(English)

Let them die with you, Laura, now you are dead,
these longings that go out to you in vain,
these eyes on whom you once bestowed
a lovely light never to gleam again.

Let this unfortunate lyre that echoes still
to sounds you woke, perish calling your name,
and may these clumsy scribblings represent
black tears my pen has shed to ease its pain.

Let Death himself feel pity, and regret
that, bound by his own law, he could not spare you,
and Love lament the bitter circumstance

that if once, in his desire for pleasure,
he wished for eyes that they might feast on you,

now weeping is all those eyes could ever do.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

Phyllis

(Español)

Lo atrevido de un pincel,
Filis, dio a mi pluma alientos:
que tan gloriosa desgracia
más causa corrió que miedo.

Logros de errar por tu causa
fue de mi ambición el cebo;
donde es el riesgo apreciable
¿qué tanto valdrá el acierto?

Permite, pues, a mi pluma
segundo arriesgado vuelo,
pues no es el primer delito
que le disculpa el ejemplo

.....

de ti, peregrina Filis?,
cuyo divino sujeto
se dio por merced al mundo,
se dio por ventaja al cielo;

en cuyas divinas aras,
ni sudor arde sabeo,
ni sangre se efunde humana,
ni bruto se corta cuello,

pues del mismo corazón
los combatientes deseos
son holocausto poluto,
son materiales afectos,

y solamente del alma
en religiosos incendios
arde sacrificio puro
de adoración y silencio.

.....

Yo, pues, mi adorada Filis,
que tu deidad reverencio,
que tu desdén idolatro
y que tu rigor venero:

bien así, como la simple
amante que, en tornos ciegos,
es despojo de la llama
por tocar el lucimiento

como el niño que, inocente,
aplica incauto los dedos
a la cuchilla, engañado
del resplandor del acero,

y herida la tierna mano,
aún sin conocer el yerro,
más que el dolor de la herida
siente apartarse del reo;

cual la enamorada Clicie
que, al rubio amante siguiendo,
siendo padre de las luces,
quiere enseñarle adimientos;

como a lo cóncavo el aire,
como a la materia el fuego,
como a su centro las peñas,
como a su fin los intentos;

bien como todas las cosas
naturales, que el deseo
de conservarse, las une
amante en lazos estrechos...

Pero ¿para qué es cansarse?
Como a ti, Filis, te quiero;
que en lo que mereces, éste
es solo encarecimiento.

Ser mujer, ni estar ausente,

no es de amarte impedimento;
pues sabes tú que las almas
distancia ignoran y sexo.

.....

¿Puedo yo dejar de amarte
si tan divina te advierto?
¿Hay causa sin producir?
¿Hay potencia sin objeto?

Pues siendo tú el más hermanso,
grande, soberano exceso
que ha visto en círculos tantos
el verde torno del tiempo,

¿para qué mi amor te vio?
¿Por qué mi fe te encarezco,
cuando es cada prenda tuya
firma de mi cautiverio?

Vuelve a ti misma los ojos
y hallarás, en ti y en ellos,
no sólo el amor posible,
mas preciso el rendimiento,

entre tanto que el cuidado,
en contemplarte suspenso,
que vivo asegura sólo
en fe de que por ti muero.

(English)

Phyllis, a brush's boldness
emboldens my feather-pen:
that brush's glorious failure
engenders hope, not fear.

Risking error in your cause

sufficed to spur me on.
When risk becomes so precious,
what value has mere success?

So do allow this quill
to risk another flight,
since, having offended once,
it otherwise has no leave.

.....

You, O exquisite Phyllis,
such a heavenly creature,
grace's gift to the world,
heaven's very perfection.

On your most hallowed altars
no Sheban gums are burnt,
no human blood is spilt,
no throat of beast is slit,

for even warring desires
within the human breast
are a sacrifice unclean,
a tie to things material,

and only when the soul
is afire with holiness
does sacrifice glow pure,
is adoration mute.

.....

I, my dearest Phyllis,
who revere you as divine,
who idolize your disdain,
and venerate your rigor;

I, like the hapless lover
who, blindly circling and circling,
on reaching the glowing core,
falls victim to the flame;

I, like the innocent child,
who, lured by the flashing steel,
rashly runs a finger
along the knife-blade's edge;

who, despite the cut he suffers,
is ignorant of the source
and protests giving it up
more than he minds the pain;

I, like adoring Clytie,
gaze fixed on golden Apollo,
who would teach him how to shine--
teach the father of brightness!

I, like air filling a vacuum,
like fire feeding on matter,
like rocks plummeting earthward,
like the will set on a goal-

in short, as all things in Nature,
moved by a will to endure,
are drawn together by love
in closely knit embrace ...

But, Phyllis, why go on?
For yourself alone I love you.
Considering your merits,
what more is there to say?

That you're a woman far away
is no hindrance to my love:
for the soul, as you well know,
distance and sex don't count.

.....

How could I fail to love you,
once I found you divine?
Can a cause fail to bring results,
capacity go unfulfilled?

Since you are the acme of beauty,
the height of all that's sublime--
that Time's green axle-tree
beholds in its endless turning--

can you wonder my love sought you out?
Why need I stress that I'm true,
when every one of your features
betokens my enslavement?

Turn your eyes toward yourself
and you'll find in yourself and in them
not only occasion for love
but compulsion to surrender.

Meanwhile my tender care
bears witness I only live
to gaze at you spellbound and sigh,
to prove that for you I die.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

Since I'm Condemned

Since I'm condemned to death
by your decree, Fabio,
and don't appeal, resist or flee
the wrathful judgment, hear me,
for there's no culprit of such guilt
should be refused confession.

Because, you say, you've been informed
my breast has caused offence to you,
I stand condemned, ferocious one.
Does uncertain news, not fact,
achieve more in your obdurate breast
than experience of so many truths?

If you've believed in others', Fabio,
why not believe in your own eyes?
Why, reversing the sense of Law,
deliver to the rope my neck?
You're as liberal with your rigours
as meanly strict with favours.

If I have looked at other eyes, Fabio,
kill me with your wrathful eyes.
If I serve another care,
let your implacable anger serve me.
And if another's love diverts me,
you, who've been my life, strike me dead.

If I have viewed another with delight,
never be delight in our mutual looks;
if with another I engaged in pleasant speech,
let your eternal displeasure point at me.
And if another love disturbs my sense,
chase out of me my soul, who've been my soul.

But as I die without resisting
my unhappy lot, my only wish
is you allow me choose the death I like.
Let my death be of my choice,

for your mere choice
continues me in life.

Let me not die of harshness, Fabio,
when I can die of love.
That will do you credit,
redeem me, since to die for love,
not for guilt, is no less a death,
but more an honoured one.

And now, finally, I seek your pardon
for all the wrongs I did to you through love.
Wrongs they are and they deserve your scorn.
Your offence is just in my accosting you,
because by loving you
I turn you to ingratitude.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

To Her Portrait

This that you see, the false presentment planned
With finest art and all the colored shows
And reasonings of shade, doth but disclose
The poor deceits by earthly senses fanned!
Here where in constant flattery expand
Excuses for the stains that old age knows,
Pretexts against the years' advancing snows,
The footprints of old seasons to withstand;

'Tis but vain artifice of scheming minds;
'Tis but a flower fading on the winds;
'Tis but a useless protest against Fate;
'Tis but stupidity without a thought,
A lifeless shadow, if we meditate;
'Tis death, tis dust, tis shadow, yea, 'tis nought.

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

You Men

(Español)

Hombres necios que acusáis
a la mujer sin razón,
sin ver que sois la ocasión
de lo mismo que culpáis:

si con ansia sin igual
solicitáis su desdén,
¿por qué quereis que obren bien
si las incitáis al mal?

Combatís su resistencia
y luego, con gravedad,
decís que fue liviandad
lo que hizo la diligencia.

Parecer quiere el denuedo
de vuestro parecer loco,
al niño que pone el coco
y luego le tiene miedo.

Queréis, con presunción necia,
hallar a la que buscáis,
para pretendida, Thais,
y en la posesión, Lucrecia

¿Qué humor puede ser más raro
que el que, falto de consejo,
el mismo empaña el espejo
y siente que no esté claro?

Con el favor y el desdén
tenéis condición igual,
quejándoos, si os tratan mal,
burlándoos, si os quieren bien.

Opinión, ninguna gana:
pues la que más se recata,
si no os admite, es ingrata,

y si os admite, es liviana

Siempre tan necios andáis
que, con desigual nivel,
a una culpáis por crüel
y a otra por fácil culpáis.

¿Pues cómo ha de estar templada
la que vuestro amor pretende,
si la que es ingrata, ofende,
y la que es fácil, enfada?

Mas, entre el enfado y pena
que vuestro gusto refiere,
bien haya la que no os quiere
y quejaos en hora buena.

Dan vuestras amantes penas
a sus libertades alas,
y después de hacerlas malas
las queréis hallar muy buenas.

¿Cuál mayor culpa ha tenido
en una pasión errada:
la que cae de rogada
o el que ruega de caído?

¿O cuál es más de culpar,
aunque cualquiera mal haga:
la que peca por la paga
o el que paga por pecar?

Pues ¿para qué os espantáis
de la culpa que tenéis?
Queredlas cual las hacéis
o hacedlas cual las buscáis.

Dejad de solicitar,
y después, con más razón,
acusaréis la afición
de la que os fuere a rogar.

Bien con muchas armas fundo
que lidia vuestra arrogancia,
pues en promesa e instancia
juntáis diablo, carne y mundo.

(English)

Silly, you men-so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you're alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman's mind.

After you've won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name,
you still expect her to behave--
you, that coaxed her into shame.

You batter her resistance down
and then, all righteousness, proclaim
that feminine frivolity,
not your persistence, is to blame.

When it comes to bravely posturing,
your witlessness must take the prize:
you're the child that makes a bogeyman,
and then recoils in fear and cries.

Presumptuous beyond belief,
you'd have the woman you pursue
be Thais when you're courting her,
Lucretia once she falls to you.

For plain default of common sense,
could any action be so queer
as oneself to cloud the mirror,
then complain that it's not clear?

Whether you're favored or disdained,
nothing can leave you satisfied.
You whimper if you're turned away,
you sneer if you've been gratified.

With you, no woman can hope to score;

whichever way, she's bound to lose;
spurning you, she's ungrateful--
succumbing, you call her lewd.

Your folly is always the same:
you apply a single rule
to the one you accuse of looseness
and the one you brand as cruel.

What happy mean could there be
for the woman who catches your eye,
if, unresponsive, she offends,
yet whose complaisance you decry?

Still, whether it's torment or anger--
and both ways you've yourselves to blame--
God bless the woman who won't have you,
no matter how loud you complain.

It's your persistent entreaties
that change her from timid to bold.
Having made her thereby naughty,
you would have her good as gold.

So where does the greater guilt lie
for a passion that should not be:
with the man who pleads out of baseness
or the woman debased by his plea?

Or which is more to be blamed--
though both will have cause for chagrin:
the woman who sins for money
or the man who pays money to sin?

So why are you men all so stunned
at the thought you're all guilty alike?
Either like them for what you've made them
or make of them what you can like.

If you'd give up pursuing them,
you'd discover, without a doubt,
you've a stronger case to make

against those who seek you out.

I well know what powerful arms
you wield in pressing for evil:
your arrogance is allied
with the world, the flesh, and the devil!

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz