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## LET NO ONE GUESS HER SEX: SOR JUANA, JESUSA PALANCARES AND THE MASK OF ANDROGYNY

### Abstract

This study analyzes the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the testimonial novel of Elena Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969), in order to discover the androgynous subjectivity of both the novohispanic poet and the protagonist of *Hasta no verte*, Jesusa Palancares. The object is not simply an exercise in identifying the androgynous characteristics of one or the other woman but to demonstrate how, in the context of the predatory patriarchies that victimize both of them, each develops the masculine aspects of her being as a strategy to cope with stress and the concrete problems caused by her situation, that of Sor Juana being that she is a disobedient nun and that of Jesusa being that she is abused, Indian, extremely poor and pugnacious. The other strategy that each woman pursues consciously is spiritual in nature: neither Sor Juana, a Catholic nun, nor Jesusa, daughter of a Catholic family, follows the dictates of her traditional religion. That the nun publishes her explorations of hermetic-gnostic beliefs is more scandalous and even dangerous, but in the case of the illiterate Jesusa, it is equally notable that she should seek intellectual studies that will bring her to understand gnostic concepts. Both are finally repudiated by their religious communities, but they accept their punishment without losing their independence of thought nor the liberating condition of their androgyny.

**Keywords:** Androgyny, Gnosticism, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Jesusa Palancares, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, Spiritualism, Coping mechanisms, Patriarchy, Amazons, *Carta atenagórica*.

### Resumen

Este estudio examina la obra de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y la novela testimonial de Elena Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969), para

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descubrir la subjetividad andrógina tanto de la poetisa novohispana como de la protagonista de *Hasta no verte*, Jesusa Palancares. El objetivo no es sencillamente un ejercicio en identificar las características andróginas en una y otra mujer sino demostrar cómo, en el contexto de los patriarcados depredadores que victimizan a las dos, cada una desarrolla los aspectos masculinos de su ser como estrategia para hacer frente al estrés y los problemas concretos causados por su situación, la de Sor Juana por ser una monja poco obediente, la de Jesusa por ser india, extremadamente pobre y tendenciosa. La otra estrategia que cada una de las mujeres persigue conscientemente es de carácter espiritual: ni Sor Juana, monja católica, ni Jesusa, hija de familia católica, siguen los preceptos de su religión tradicional. El que la monja publique sus exploraciones de creencias hermético-gnósticas es más escandaloso y hasta peligroso, pero en el caso de la iletrada Jesusa, es igualmente notable que ella busque estudios intelectuales que la lleven a entender conceptos gnósticos. Las dos finalmente son repudiadas por sus comunidades religiosas, pero aceptan su castigo sin perder la independencia de su pensamiento ni la condición libertaria de su androginia.

**Palabras clave:** Androginia, gnosticismo, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Jesusa Palancares, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, espiritualismo, estrategias para hacer frente al estrés, patriarcado, amazonas, *Carta atenagórica*.

The cliché I open with will later be effaced by the originality of the women who occupy this study and the solutions they find to their common problem. The commonplace is this: Although they lived and died three centuries apart, and even greater distances separated them in terms of education and material comfort, their status as women subjected them to similar losses of respect, freedom and happiness as captives of male-dominated power structures. I speak of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, seventeenth-century Mexico's courtly nun of letters, and the brawling, unlettered protagonist of Elena Poniatowska's twentieth-century novel, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (Here's to You, Dear Jesus) (1969), about camp follower Jesusa Palancares (Josefina Bórquez, real-life model of the fictional Jesusa). Neither was encouraged, either in the Jesuit-dominated baroque Mexico of militant Catholicism or in the militarized, then post-revolutionary, Mexico of the mid-twentieth-century, to develop their gifts of unusual intelligence and strength of character. They were open game in a world that was all man's. Each had to devise a shield to defend herself against the constant predation that was her lot. As

it turned out, both Sor Juana and Jesusa Palancares avail themselves of two coping mechanisms. Though these offer imperfect sanctuary from the steady hail of slings and arrows that their lives invite, both serve them better than any other safeguard they attempt; the first, easiest and most enduring, is an androgynist persona that does not merely emphasize the masculine assertiveness in their nature but in fact injects an aura of independence in their being; the second, requiring more effort to acquire, is an alternative religious belief that at first offers hope of freedom, but in the end gets them into trouble, again from the predatory patriarchy.

Two especially lively discussions on androgyny take place in the 1970s and 1980s: one in the literature on neoplatonism and gnostic religious sects, and another in feminist dialogues on various permutations of sexuality: intersexuality, transsexuality, homosexuality, etc., especially those prompted by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of Her Own* (1929). The debate on androgyny centers on whether such a being is double-sexed, mainly masculine with feminine characteristics, or vice versa, whether androgyny has at all to do with physical sexuality or is instead only psychological, or if it is a form of hermaphroditism.<sup>1</sup> For me, Sor Juana and Jesusa Palancares are both psychological androgynes who demonstrate, in more or less equilibrium, feminine and masculine character traits in their nature and behavior, especially regarding personality and intellect.

Sor Juana's "masculine" mind and her even less feminine will to obey church rule governing the behavior of nuns caused her to earn a public tongue-lashing from her confessor, Father Antonio Núñez de Miranda,<sup>2</sup> in 1680, because she had accepted 200 pesos from the city fathers to write one of the triumphal arches welcoming the new viceroy and his wife to the capital.<sup>3</sup> Some time later, a furious Sor Juana wrote to her confessor to fire him, because, instead of taking up his complaint with her privately, "como ordena la paternal corrección" (as fatherly correction most properly demands<sup>4</sup>) he attempted to punish her "por amenazas [sic]" (by threats) and "por mortificarme . . . publicamente con todos" (by mortifying me . . . publically in front of everyone), all without keeping in mind that "yo [no] tengo tan servil natural" (I am not of such a servile nature) that would lend itself to the success of such a tactic.<sup>5</sup> The

*Neptuno* brought her considerable renown, which infuriated Núñez de Miranda.<sup>6</sup> However, the viceroys, much praised in Sor Juana's literary architectural piece, would become the nun's good friends and staunch supporters at court and would ameliorate, to a degree, the animosity of the church. Sor Juana's attitude and language in her letter to her confessor, as well as her success in thus ridding herself of his influence, illustrate one aspect of her androgynous nature.

Another androgynous tendency might be seen in the frequent appearance of dual or ambiguously sexed figures in her work, some of them possibly projections of herself. In the Leonor of the comedy *Los empeños de una casa* (The House of Trials), for example, we have a beautiful but curiously self-sufficient damsel whose striking feminine beauty is balanced by the masculine mind of one who was inclined to study from an early age "con tan ardientes desvelos, / con tan ansiosos cuidados, / que reduje a tiempo breve / fatigas de mucho espacio" (with such passionate late-night study, with such anxious care, that I finished off long-lasting projects in short order) and quickly became "el admirable blanco / de todas las atenciones" (the admired target / of everyone's attention),<sup>7</sup> which could serve as a fair summation of the autobiographical sketch the nun gives us in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (Answer to Sister Filotea de la Cruz), written in defense of the widespread criticism her *Carta atenagórica* (Letter Worthy of Athena) attracted upon its publication by the Bishop of Puebla in November 1690.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *La segunda Celestina* (The Second Celestina), a play Sor Juana finished and polished after Agustín de Salazar y Torres's death in 1675, the protagonist is doña Beatriz, a beautiful amazon type who combines characteristics of the Renaissance damsel and Diana the huntress. She makes her appearance with a firearm in hand, ready to shoot the man she thinks is following her, and in a later speech to a woman friend, confides that she had never thought to allow love to enter her life.<sup>9</sup> Beatriz is not the only amazon armed for battle on Sor Juana's pages. In the *Loa a los años del virrey* the marquis de la Laguna (Poem to the Birthday of the Viceroy), a one-act birthday play written probably in 1681 or 1682,<sup>10</sup> Venus is hailed by nymphs and amazons, both beings of beauty and ambiguous sexuality. The amazons here brag that their courage and ferocity in battle are such that "con valor el sexo desmentimos" (with our courage we give the

lie to our gender).<sup>11</sup> No attention is drawn, of course, to the fact that Venus (Aphrodite, Athena [recall that Sor Juana's letter on Christ's *finezas* (acts of love) is deemed "worthy of Athena"]) is more than androgynous; she is a "sexually mobile" god(dess) famed both for her stupendous intellect and her incomparable power as a warrior.<sup>12</sup> As with most of her work, Sor Juana has presented her recipient with at least one subtext beneath the entertaining surface.

One further amazonic example. Anticipating Enlightenment, romantic and postmodern traditions, in which radiant, light-shedding amazons abound,<sup>13</sup> Sor Juana's androgynous Aurora in her poem *Primero sueño* (First Dream), "del viejo Tithón la bella esposa / — amazona de luces mil vestida, / contra la noche armada, / hermosa si atrevida, / valiente aunque llorosa—, / su frente . . . hermosa / de matutinas luces coronada" (the beautiful wife of Tithonus— an Amazon robed in a thousand lights to vanquish night, comely though bold, brave, if dewy-eyed—[with] a brow crowned with a matutinal glow),<sup>14</sup> gloriously arrives to overshadow the night.<sup>15</sup> Her advancement upon the darkness at dawn unleashes a titanic battle of chiaroscuro that can be interpreted from the vantage of many thematic angles—neoplatonism, gnosticism, Christianity, psychology, feminism, and more. The battle does not end when night retreats, for she vows to regather strength on the other side of earth and come back when day is weary and can be chased away.

On a lighter note, but very like the amazonian Aurora of the *Sueño*, the Virgin Mary of Sor Juana's *villancicos* (carols, or church songs), a "bizarra guerrera" clad in armor like Doña Quijota, a *caballera andante* of the Heavenly Plains, sallies forth as "la Valiente de aventuras, / Deshacedora de tuertos, / Destrozadora de injurias" (the Brave Woman of adventures, / She who rights wrongs, / Destroyer of crimes), and she, too, is a radiant, light-shedding warrior woman who "Lleva de rayos del Sol / resplandeciente armadura, / de las Estrellas el yelmo / [y] los botines de la Luna" (is dressed in armor fashioned from the rays of the Sun, / whose helmet is made of Stars / and whose boots are of the Moon).<sup>16</sup> Even as we grin—for Sor Juana has a ready and raucous sense of humor—we must shake off those images of the sweet-faced Virgin in blue with the chubby babe at her breast and imagine instead a celestial Wonder Woman who can catch arrows in her teeth. This Virgin never

has a baby around to hamper her androgynous thrusts and parries, for Sor Juana sends her out on patrol to compete against her grown son for heaven itself (*Villancico* 217); to capture souls with knotty theology lessons (*Villancico* 219); to show the angels themselves how it's done as heavenly music director (*Villancico* 220); to take the place of the sexy Shulamite! (*Villancico* 221); to right wrongs and find the Holy Grail: "en una nueva aventura / halla el Tesoro Escondido / que tantos andantes buscan, / donde, con cierta virtud / que la favorece oculta, / de vivir eternamente / tiene manera segura" (on a new adventure / she finds the Hidden Treasure / that so many knights errant seek, / by which, with a certain secret virtue that favors her, / she is guaranteed eternal life) (*Villancico* 222).<sup>17</sup> All this for starters.

The interest we see in Sor Juana's work in asexual or sex-neutral beings is, not surprisingly, reflected in the characterization of the author, which we are given firsthand from the poet and which we can infer from close reading. On at least four occasions she warns readers against thinking of her as a woman, or at least to think of her gender as secondary to the importance of her intellect, which would place her in a space beyond sexual difference, a gnostic space separating body and mind in which women and men both speak as equals, in Church and every sphere of influence.<sup>18</sup> Although in her *Villancicos a Santa Catarina* (Carols to Saint Catherine of Alexandria) (1691) she is celebrating the life and martyrdom of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, when she dramatizes the saint's confrontation with the wise men whom she bests with her knowledge, we know that Sor Juana is said to have done the same as a young girl in the viceregal court and that, being written shortly after the trauma of the *Carta atenagórica* and the desperate plea of the *Respuesta*, the strong autobiographical nature of these *villancicos* cannot be denied. So when she says, "De una Mujer se convencen / todos los Sabios de Egipto, / para prueba de que el sexo / no es esencia en lo entendido" (All the Wise Men of Egypt / are persuaded by a Woman / that proof of one's sex / is not to be found in one's intelligence),<sup>19</sup> we can imagine Sor Juana speaking directly to Fernández de Santa Cruz and, especially, to Father Antonio Núñez de Miranda, as though to ask, how can you condemn me for studying and writing when it is not I, a woman, who does these things, but I, a mind, an intellect, a spirit of God

who thinks and speaks as He has given me to know? Her thinking is too advanced for them, however, no matter how often she repeats the hermetic and at once strictly human wisdom that guides her work and her conscience.

She could not be more explicit than when answering a gentleman from Peru who has sent her a ladies gift, nor more anachronically aware of the arguments regarding androgyny that fill journals and books of the seventies and eighties:

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 Virgen.

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.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps Sor Juana is inspired here in part by the neutrality of the word "virgin" in Latin, and her status as a virgin, compounded by her sexless marriage to Christ and her perennial cloistered state, but there is nothing coy about her verse, no baroque games: Hers is not a woman's body per se but a mode of transport for a soul, which, elsewhere she assures us "distancia ignora [...] y sexo" (ignores [both] distance and gender).<sup>21</sup> A respectful admirer of the Portuguese noblewoman, the Duquesa de Aveyro, "claro honor de las mujeres, / [y] de los hombres docto ultraje" (a brilliant honor to women, / [and] , an erudite outrage to men), this courtly, educated woman also proves "que no es el sexo / de la inteligencia parte" (that sex plays no role in intelligence),<sup>22</sup> a statement which, while lending

the duchess a touch of aggressively androgynous independence, clarifies Sor Juana's philosophy on sexuality and intellect. The battle she fought, she lost ultimately, at least on the pragmatic field: They took away her books and her scientific and musical instruments, they threatened her with the Inquisition, they made her sign oaths in blood and Núñez de Miranda finally got his perfect nun who was dead to the world, unable to publish or speak beyond the walls of the convent. But as a socioethical, psychological and spiritual position that she held to the last, and which we appreciate in today's much different gender environment, Juana Inés won because her androgynous capacity to separate sex and thought was a precociously modern view of mind and matter—and because it was morally correct.

Her future sister-in-arms, Josefina Bórquez, a.k.a. Jesusa Palancares, when transformed by Elena Poniatowska into a novelized testimonial heroine, would scarcely recognize a relationship of equality with the elegant and famous literary nun. Were she able to enter the convent of San Jerónimo, it would be as a servant or slave to the Spanish and creole women of means who were accustomed to being waited on and having servants carry messages outside the convent or make purchases for them 'in the world.'<sup>23</sup> Jesusa, in short, would travel back in time only to find herself in exactly the same circumstances as those that enslave her to privileged women in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*. The difference might be that if she were assigned to Sor Juana's condominium-cell, the two could recognize in each other a kindred spirit of rebellion against male oppression, against the unfairness of Counter Reformation Christianity's presumed Good News for all, against the tight strictures of a social organization that simply has no room in it for the genius, energy and initiative of an independent woman of intelligence. They would surely see how comfortable each is with her masculine side on prominent display while her feminine side, though not denied or eliminated, is simply allowed to lie dormant. If Juana Inés had been able to read *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, she would surely have launched her quixotic Virgin in full armor to the rescue.

For Jesusa Palancares does break our hearts throughout Poniatowska's novel. She is a feisty, never-give-up fighter who

nonetheless appears to have no hope of surviving, winning or making gains in life. While most loudly she blusters about how fine she is doing, most loudly we read between the lines about how lonely, abandoned and hopeless she is in reality. Having lost her mother at a very young age, and been abandoned emotionally by her father shortly after, Jesusa grows up hermetically sealed against love and other tender emotions, which we can surmise is a fear of losing them. One day her stepmother stabs her in the back with a knife when she is barely eight or 10 years old. Jesusita neither cries nor complains, not even when the stepmother's own mother sees the bloody wound and asks who did such a cruel thing to her. Jesusa remains silent, mouth and soul sealed. If she ever does speak of the horrors that befall her, it is to deny the pain, the fear, the sorrow, the very fact of its physical reality. A similar contradiction occurs when she speaks of the pets and adoptive children she loses: "He pasado bastantes tragos amargos, nomás que ahora ya de tanto que siento ya no siento" (I have been through so many bitter patches that now, from so much feeling [suffering] I simply do not feel [suffer]).<sup>24</sup> And we do not believe her.

After her years as a young girl in the Mexican Revolution, during which she suffered unspeakable abuse from her husband Pedro—"Él me pegaba, me descalabraba y con las heridas y la misma sangre me enlagué y se me acabó el pelo . . . . Allí en la cabeza estaba la plasta de mugre y allí seguía, porque yo no me podía bañar . . ." (He kept hitting me, he broke my head open and with my wounds and the blood that never cleared away I became permanently injured and I lost my hair . . . . There on my head was a gooey mess of filth that never went away, because I could never take a bath . . .)<sup>25</sup>—Jesusa finally arms herself with a gun and fights back; she achieves *détente* with Pedro and even rises to an *ad hoc* officer's position when Pedro is killed. Having admitted to being "muy hombrada" (very masculine) and that as a child "siempre me gustó jugar a la guerra, a las pedradas, a la rayuela, al trompo, a las canicas, a la lucha" (I always liked playing war games, throwing rocks, hopscotch, spinning tops, marbles and fighting),<sup>26</sup> she was already primed for androgynous status; after her service as a *soldadera* (camp follower) who plays out the archetype of the amazon,<sup>27</sup> Jesusa Palancares confirms early on in the novel her status as an androgynous heroine. Claudette

Williams rejects this analysis, citing Jesusa's self-contradictory assertions of "stereotypically male and female traits (e.g. strength and tenderness)" which nonetheless

de-emphasize the conflict underlying the harmonious façade. Her unified identity is no more than a fragile illusion that she has created. The complexity and contradictions of her psyche are a more reliable index of her human identity. In the final analysis, Jesusa Palancares may be memorable for those exemplary feminist values and attitudes that she proclaims and exhibits, but no less so for the human feelings, yearnings and anxieties that she seeks to hide.<sup>28</sup>

Williams's point is that if Jesusa, for example, takes in a stray dog or child from the streets and the dog later dies or the child runs away or dies, her broken heart is an admission of love lost that Jesusa is unwilling to admit, because it hurts too much and makes her vulnerable to future pain. This example of "human feelings, yearnings and anxieties that she seeks to hide" represents for Williams an emotion that prohibits a characterization of androgyny for Jesusa. This is a logic that escapes me. Whether we are speaking of feminine or masculine or a neutral combination of both genders, the individual's humanity is always present, and with it the emotions and complex psychological motivations that attend them. To be androgynous is not to cease being human. Indeed, as Carolyn Heilbrun has pointed out, the androgynous state, especially for women, is an ideal which offers recuperation from an overly masculinized culture, leading to a state of psychic equilibrium and wholeness that "implies a redemptive, restorative and creative power" which theoretically should enhance the human potential.<sup>29</sup>

As I read Jesusa Palancares's painful journey toward enlightenment, this is indeed what her increasing embrace of androgyny affords her: recuperation, liberation, restoration, creativity and redemption. It does not, unfortunately, also pay the rent. But because "androgyny equips one with coping behaviors," as a mediator between stress and personal stress, and "decreases . . . vulnerability to psychological dysfunction,"<sup>30</sup> it can help someone like Jesusa cope with the hardship of scrabbling for material survival while at the same time she struggles with her own personal demons (alcoholism,

illiteracy, anger management, solitude). Perhaps instinctively, or perhaps out of the painful recognition that she would be unlikely to attract a prince charming, Jesusa leads herself steadily toward an androgynous subjectivity. Under her own measured gaze, her body is not attractive; it is clean, but being dark-skinned and short, it is not pretty by reigning standards. Thus she decides she would rather turn it into a man's body and go with men to do what they do, enjoying, above all, the freedom they have.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, however, at 16, with Pedro gone much of the time, Jesusa works in a cantina singing and playing the guitar and drinking, dressed to the nines in silk dresses. She feels happier than she can remember. But one day Pedro returns and orders her to come with him; she dons men's clothes—now “nadie se dio cuenta si era hombre o si era mujer (nobody could tell if I was a man or a woman)”—and from that moment on “nunca me volví a sentir libre” (I never felt free again), for Pedro teaches her to walk among hails of bullets.<sup>32</sup> She alone survives the war, but his teaching is a helpful legacy for a woman who must learn to fight like a man to preserve her independence. Any man who with an “I love you” would try to possess her quickly discovers his error. The knife with which he intends to attack her ends up in Jesusa's hand and its ex owner in the street: “Aunque fuera el dios Huitzilopochtli, conmigo se estrella” (Even if he's the god Huitzilopochtli, he's gonna be sorry if he messes with me).<sup>33</sup> She's rather proud of being seen as “¡Más brava que un gallo gallina!” (Meaner than a junkyard dog!)<sup>34</sup>

Accepting masculine friendship but not sexual relationships, Jesusa refuses to play by the rules of her society, even when the price of her decision costs her practically everything that could shelter her in this life. She prefers the company of gay men, most likely because they offer another coping mechanism: She can spend time with men who are not abusive machos but, simply, human beings. Although she will not admit it, a decision in no way at odds with her androgynous lifestyle, she satisfies maternal yearnings by taking in stray animals and street children and caring for them with genuine generosity, consistency and love. And she feeds her masculine spiritual and intellectual side with assiduous study of the *Obra Espiritual*, the spiritual-religious calling that liberates her from yet another aspect of patriarchy's disillusionments (orthodox Christianity's top-down male-dominated dogma). What Jesusa

calls the *Obra* is spiritualism, at times mentioned as a synonym of spiritism.<sup>35</sup> The temple she attends for her studies and other spiritual activities is a type of school, an anti-Catholic place designed to help her refine her soul through development of her talent as a seer, a medicine woman and a visionary seeking self-knowledge through trances. In spite of the importance placed on spiritual healing, the *Obra's* creed is centered on the soul, the immaterial life of the spirit. Sor Juana's re-reading of the Bible leads her to a similar alternative (i.e. a non-orthodox, scarcely Catholic) religious worldview, which I will take up after considering Jesusa's spiritual coping mechanism.

Jesusa would not have heard the word gnostic, yet the Road she follows from the first chapter on is decidedly a Way of Perfection toward intellectual illumination and the liberation of the body that ties her soul to the infernal world, and is as perfect a thumbnail definition of gnosticism as might be attached to her spiritual project.<sup>36</sup> The division between body and spirit cannot be clearer than in the moment when a brother of the *Obra* enters the bar to recruit souls. "Yo era un animal muy bruto, una yegua muy arisca" (I was a brute animal, a high-strung mare), Jesusa confesses, addicted to drink, dance and fighting.<sup>37</sup> At that moment, she has no faith. That night, the spirit of none other than Francisco I. Madero manifests,<sup>38</sup> but Jesusa still clings to her corporeal powers. The religious brother insists on converting her, so he asks her for the name of one of her own dead that he can call forth. The spirit shows up, Jesusa recognizes her father's voice and "por ese testimonio comencé a creer" (through that testimony I began to believe), Jesusa says.<sup>39</sup>

Thus begins her work with the *Obra*. Part of it is hands-on, and takes advantage of her apparent gift for serving as a medium to communicate with dead people, some of whom do not realize they are dead. Another, considerable, portion of her involvement requires pure study, day and night, "el esfuerzo intelectual por acercarse al entendimiento a través del estudio" (the intellectual effort to achieve understanding through study), a process that causes Jesusa to notice "una lucha entre seres de luz y seres de oscuridad, en el progreso que hacen unos para iluminar el entendimiento y su propio aprendizaje" (a battle between beings of light and darkness, during the progress that some beings make to enlighten themselves and enhance their apprenticeship").<sup>40</sup> Another aspect of the *Obra* is its

evident anti-Catholic organization, with the active role it allows for women in the leadership hierarchy, all the jobs allocated among both men and women. Jesusa herself is a *vidente* (seer), medium and *curandera* (shaman). One sour note: Progress toward the light is measured by suffering, and both the suffering and punishment for not enough of it are determined by male “protectors” assigned to each member of the *Obra*: “Para reconocer el camino espiritual necesita uno travesar muchos precipicios, dolores y adolescencias. Así el protector que nos guía puede manifestarse a través de nuestro sufrimiento” (To recognize one’s spiritual road one must pass through many dangers, pains and suffering. Thus the protector who guides us can manifest himself as a result of our suffering).<sup>41</sup>

If he thinks the candidate should suffer more, he returns her or him to earth to endure another lifetime. Jesusa Palancares has been returned for imperfections of the soul and not having suffered enough.<sup>42</sup> With what we learn of the awfulness of her life through the novel, we begin to wonder about the benefits of the *Obra* and how far from the patriarchy it has organized itself. Jesusa is eager to tell us that it is not all about punishments but also about positive efforts to acquire knowledge to satisfy one’s “ayuno . . . espiritual” (spiritual hunger):<sup>43</sup> a phrase that can clearly be termed *gnosis*, the understanding obtained through the “muchos ojos dentro del cerebro” (many eyes inside the mind)<sup>44</sup>—those would be the “intelectuales bellos ojos” (beautiful intellectual eyes) of Sor Juana<sup>45</sup>—which one possesses since birth “como un atadido de estrellas” (like a bundle of stars) but which one has to know how to focus. To perceive what they reveal, says Jesusa, “hay que cerrar los ojos corporales, macizo, . . . para poder ver detrás” (one has to close one’s eyes, tightly, . . . to be able to see in the back of one’s eyes).<sup>46</sup> The emphasis in her narration is on knowledge that comes through a mystic trance separating mind and body. Jesusa advances in understanding and *gnosis*; with these come respect, from and for others, and she is capable of joking a little about her situation. She receives honors in the hierarchy of the temple. And although she later separates from the organization, which begins to discriminate against her for reasons of racism and classism,<sup>47</sup> she is now so advanced on her road that she can distance herself from the temple without losing her faith. She does not need the *Obra Espiritual* when her own *obra espiritual* has been internalized.

We know from her *Respuesta* (autobiographical defense of her right to study and write) and several other sources that, except for 20 lessons of Latin grammar,<sup>48</sup> Sor Juana is entirely self-taught, and that her erudition is legendary in the New Spain of her time and throughout the Baroque era. An enormous share of her knowledge covers every aspect of platonism, pythagorian philosophy, neoplatonism, Egyptian and Christian hermetism, Kabbala, gnosticism, Greco-Roman thought and the Bible cover to cover, as well as all the church Fathers—in short, virtually all known philosophical and religious knowledge. With the finest “synthetic” mind in New Spain, Sor Juana criss-crosses readings among her thousands of works, seeking “variaciones y ocultos engarces . . . de manera que parece se corresponden y están unidas con admirable trabazón y concierto” (divergences and hidden links . . . Thus it appears that they correspond each one to another and are united with a wondrous bond and harmonious agreement).<sup>49</sup> From this ‘Obra Espiritual,’ accomplished by an androgynous mind, came what had to be an inevitable, because true and sensible, conclusion: the canonical Bible has some problems, not just as it is interpreted by the Fathers and their contemporary followers, but probably stemming from its composition at the outset; there being no more assiduous biblical exegetes than the gnostics—that is really their chief undertaking: re-reading Genesis with all the considerable intellectual power at their disposal<sup>50</sup>—Sor Juana is naturally seduced by their canon, which she learns about in detail by reading the Church fathers, such as Ireneo and Origin, who railed against the gnostics; the hermetics were gnostics by another name and include Isis, Sor Juana’s favorite goddess, among their cast of characters; Isis being the Virgin Mary’s pre-Christian mother,<sup>51</sup> Sor Juana is naturally drawn to hermetism and also neoplatonism. Kabbala has its own attractions, not least of them being Sophia (Isis), an androgynous female wisdom figure who was co-creator of the world.<sup>52</sup> As an androgynous wisdom figure herself who is tired of being told by men that she should shut up, draw a hood over her head and find a closet to live in, Sor Juana is vitally invested in spiritual practices that not only make historical and intellectual sense, but also offer comfort to the soul of a woman who wants to be made whole as a human, without having to give up thinking in the process. The greatest freedom of gnosticism is the freedom to think.<sup>53</sup>

The nun's incomparably rich *Primero sueño* will support dozens of sophisticated analyses; one, from beginning to end, is a reading of the poem as a philosophical-religious manifesto—or 'bible'—plumbing the depths of hermetic gnosticism. In one respect, we can see, as in a videotape, the way the mind's "fantasía" (fantasy, or imagination) forms "imágenes diversas" (diverse images) of the Cosmos and shows them to the soul.<sup>54</sup> Next we see how the soul, in a gnostic trance, abandons interest in the body as it transfers all value to the intellectual spirit and prepares to take off on its "vuelo intelectual" (intellectual flight).<sup>55</sup> The rest of the 975-verse poem is a blow-by-blow description of the hermetic-gnostic search for knowledge of sufficient completeness and purity to allow a permanent divestment of the body to effect the desired union with its androgynous creator. There are two failed attempts. The body finally awakens as day breaks and night is routed. Although the soul, which possesses the "I" of this poem, is encased again in its land-locked body, the last verses are saturated with light-filled vocabulary, and the I's announcement that she is awake is as good as a promise that her enlightened intellect is anything but discouraged. She is a gnostic, which means she will not be deterred by the bindings of earth. Her mission is to leave the gravity-bound body and to rejoin heaven's light. Night promises to come again, the body will sleep again, she will enter a trance again and fly away toward the light.

In less spectacular ways, Sor Juana's entire work is filled with allusions to hermetic, neoplatonic and gnostic principles, from that of the joy of suffering ("vuestro favor me condena / a otra especie de desdicha, / pues me quitáis con la dicha / el mérito de la pena" [your favor condemns me / to another species of misfortune, / for with joy you take from me / the gift of suffering])<sup>56</sup> to equality of the sexes, even between Christ and the Virgin Mary: When she ascends to heaven, "es Dios Quien entra en Trono más escelso" (it is God Who takes a higher throne)<sup>57</sup>—even to the superiority of Isis and the Virgin Mary over God, a serpentine proof worthy of the best gnostic exegesis, which in the *Neptuno alegórico* unwinds from a rather pedestrian equation of the new Marquis of the Laguna with the aquatic god Neptune all the way through Neptune's lineage, which happens to include Isis, until it somehow comes out at Mary, whose name is related to *mar* (sea) and she to Isis, and the two of

them to God.<sup>58</sup> This could never happen in the Bible, but the math works out precisely in Sor Juana's hermetic puzzle.

However, Counter Reformation New Spain was not a hermetic state governed by the principles of Sophia and Isis, nor counseled by the free-thinking wisdom of gnosticism's most experienced biblical exegetes. Nor was post-revolutionary Mexico, even in the temple of the protectors of the *Obra Espiritual*, governed by race-neutral, gender-neutral, class-neutral policies of freedom and equality for all. Jesusa was studying hard; she was earning recognition in the temple and was a sought-after medium. Then jealousy among some of the other women sprang up. And suddenly there was the issue of her dark Indian skin and her evident poverty. These became motives for forcing her out, despite the spiritually ascendent teachings of the *Obra*. It was accomplished with a terrible smallness of mind, by gossip, envy, treachery and abandonment, and by a strategy as petty, finally, as women moving around the room so that there was never an empty chair for Jesusa to occupy. And although she decided on her own to leave, we are accustomed to reading between the lines and finding her tightly wrapped in great pain and endless sorrow, all alone and with no one to help her overcome the hurt.<sup>59</sup> But the *Obra* she has internalized helps her cope: She continues her work as a healing woman.<sup>60</sup> Her other coping mechanism is a facet of androgyny: a vast and terrible silence compounded by a cynical redefinition of the internal eyes of the *Obra*: What she sees now is part of eternal poverty's fatalism: the predetermined road to (desired) death: "Aquí estoy jirimiquiando, ya saco la lengua como los colgados, ya me estoy muriendo y sigo en pie como los árboles podridos. Sólo Dios sabe hasta cuándo" (Here on earth I'm just killing time, my tongue is already sticking out like someone hanging by the neck, I'm half dead already yet here I am still on my feet like a rotten tree. God only know for how much longer.)<sup>61</sup> To Jesusa's way of thinking, the hardest part of living is not dying on time. She has asked God to let her drop dead on the top of a hill so the vultures can more easily carry her off from there. She wants to be buried in the belly of a buzzard: "Yo no creo que la gente sea buena, la mera verdad, no. Sólo Jesucristo y no lo conocí. Y mi padre, que nunca supe si me quiso o no. Pero de aquí sobre la tierra, ¿quién quiere usted que sea bueno?" (I don't think people are good at heart, if

you want to know the truth, I don't. Only Jesus Christ and him I never met. And my father, although I never knew if he loved me or not. But right here on earth, where do you think you're going to find a good person?)<sup>62</sup>

And what was Sor Juana thinking, just a year or so before her death, as she repudiated the religious belief system she had developed and carefully written down, before signing a series of oaths as to the truthfulness of the church system she questions, on the orders of men of the Church, with the blood of her body, which they watched her extract? I saw two of those "votos de sangre" (blood oaths) in Rare Books and Manuscripts of the Benson Latin American Collection in the library at the University of Texas, Austin, and the orange-tinted blood of her signature moved me as little has in my professional life.<sup>63</sup> Sor Juana had been such a stubbornly independent thinker, steadfastly courageous to defend her right to be so in that time and place, and I was saddened to see the evidence that she had been brought to her knees, finally, and coerced into obedience. Oh, she still thought for herself, and we now have hope, at least, that she continued to acquire books and to write until she sickened of a plague while caring for her sister nuns and died in April 1695.<sup>64</sup> But the unique individual we knew and grew to love through her public presence in writing began to die the November 25, 1690, day that Fernández de Santa Cruz wrote her a thinly concealed threat of inquisitional castigation should she not stop concerning herself with secular letters and, while claiming to be rewarding her extraordinary talent, published her private essay-letter to him as a warning and an irreversible act of blackmail to force Sor Juana's hand in the direction he so lovingly advised her.<sup>65</sup> A gifted reader, Sor Juana knew the damage he had inflicted on her by publishing the *Carta atenagórica*; thus the dripping sarcasm alternating with fear-stiffened rhetoric with which she begins her response to the bishop, and I paraphrase a lengthy, roundabout *introit*: Illness and fear have kept me from answering your immensely learned, extremely discrete, deeply devout and unbelievably loving letter, she says.<sup>66</sup> And then, citing learned saints and elders, she throws sand, to cover the effect of a dozen expressions having to do with silence, inability to say, remaining speechless, humility, not knowing, unworthiness (see previous note). In short, she says, how can I thank you? What you

have done “excede a la capacidad del agradecimiento, tanto por grande como por no esperado” (exceeds all powers of gratitude, as much because it was so large as because it was so unexpected), and leaves me dumbstruck and quite unable to proceed.<sup>67</sup>

As we know, she does proceed. With irony, humor, erudition, persuasion, eloquence, vehemence—the beleaguered nun writes an intellectual autobiography that is of course doomed to further outrage her male audience, but which will vindicate the androgynous spirit of independence and ideological honesty by which Sor Juana had ever lived. These will not be extinguished with her silencing, any more than Jesusa Palancares’s were as she fell silent when driven from her church. True, in keeping with the gnostic drive to ascension inspiring them both, we have seen Jesusa yearning for a hilltop rendezvous with a buzzard—her popular cultural version of reuniting the body with Creation by flying around in the tummy of a carrion bird, in her mind a perfectly natural and desirable end to her miserable life. In Sor Juana’s case, I believe it fair to say she sought a kind of suicide when deprived of her library, instruments, and the stimulating conversation of outsiders. Although we presume (or at least hope) she acquired a few new books, it was not as easy as it had been when she could meet her friend Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora at the bars and reach through to take whatever latest reading treasure he had brought her. Oddly, or perhaps not, Núñez de Miranda had returned as Sor Juana’s confessor, and his biographer reports that Núñez was worried each day that he would find the nun dead in her cell, so viciously had she taken to flagellating herself. He might not recognize a gnostic’s ascetic rejection of the body in preparation for an assault on heaven. In her weakened physical state, Sor Juana dedicated herself to caring day and night for those of her sister nuns stricken with fever. I wonder if she thanked her god when the plague struck her down and within days carried her up, up and away. She left too soon to meet Jesusa’s buzzard, but as time is of no essence in the gnostic Mind, I like to think they have finally met, and not in a convent as mistress and servant, but as bodiless intellects with very similar notions about mind, matter and men.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rather than repeat those details here, I will refer my readers to some of the literature and say that I am most persuaded by arguments of the psychological nature. On sex-type androgynes, see June Singer, *Androgyny: Toward a New Theory of Sexuality*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976); for a very sustained discussion of androgyny throughout an otherwise fascinating discussion of sex-types in history, see Camille Paglia's take on amazons and androgyny in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson*. (New York: Vintage, 1991); on psychological androgyny, see Ellen Piel Cook, *Psychological Androgyny*. (New York: Pergamon, 1985); on the spiritual connection with androgyny, Earl Jeffrey Richards, "Sexual Metamorphosis, Gender Difference and the Republic of Letters: Or Androgyny As a Feminist Plea for Universalism in Christine de Pizan and Virginia Woolf." *Romance Languages Annual 2* (1990) 146–52.

<sup>2</sup> The gnostics, known to be androgynous, famously refuse to comply with false institutions, whether by marrying, procreating, living in families or obeying temporal powers, be they pagan or Christian. See Jacques Lacarrière, *The Gnostics*. Trans. Nina Rootes. (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989) 11. By my reading, Sor Juana's religious persuasion tended toward Christian hermetic gnosticism. For a detailed explanation of both gnosticism and Sor Juana's embrace of it, see Linda Egan, "Un ángel caído como abogado del diablo: la 'demonología' de Sor Juana." *Diosas, demonios y debate: Las armas metafísicas de Sor Juana*. (Salta, Argentina: Biblioteca de Textos Universitarios, 1997) 33–49.

<sup>3</sup> One of two arches commissioned for the occasion, the other designed and written by Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, Sor Juana's was titled *Neptuno alegórico* (Allegorical Neptune), so called to allow her to play on the Marqués de la Laguna's name (Marquis of the Lake) by summoning to metaphorical duty a water god and connecting him to a series of female goddesses, starting the genealogy with his mother Isis, the Egyptian goddess of wisdom, and working her way through successive European divine wise women—Athena, Minerva, Sophia, et. al.—until arriving at the Virgin Mary, which slick move the name of the Marquis's wife permits her, as the *Mar* in *María* Luisa in Spanish means sea, another watery allusion. The entire religio-political lineage that Sor Juana traces, supposedly to honor the new viceroy but in fact exalting his wife and the sister goddesses Isis and Mary above all, raised her confessor's hackles and led to the public scolding referenced in my text.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Alatorre, "La *Carta* de Sor Juana al P. Núñez (1682)." *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 35 (1987) 625.

<sup>6</sup> In one of his many books characterizing the perfect nun, Núñez de Miranda details an example of the bad nun: "tras todos estos pasajes . . . se percibe la silueta de Sor Juana" (behind all these descriptions . . . one can perceive the silhouette of Sor Juana) because everything his good nun is, Sor Juana is not, says Alatorre 615. One can, at times, almost sympathize with the punctilious

Father Núñez, for although it was quite common for women in New Spain to enter convents for much less than true religious conviction, still, San Jerónimo's rule included the requirements that its nuns be legitimately born Spaniards or creoles who would observe vows of chastity, poverty, obedience and enclosure. Sor Juana's illegitimate birth was overlooked, as was common in that era, and there was no question that she maintained chastity and the cloistered state, but she was scarcely "dead to the world," what with her constant visits in the locutory with all and sundry from the court and her writing and publishing activities, nor did she keep the vow of poverty, becoming quite wealthy from her writing and investments, in part facilitated by her job as convent bookkeeper. See María del Carmen Reyna, *El convento de San Jerónimo: vida conventual y finanzas*. (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990) 21.

<sup>7</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras completas*. Ed. Alfonso Méndez Plancarte (vols. 1–3) and Alberto G. Salceda (vol. 4) (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951–1957). 388: vv. 309–312, 315–317. I will cite Sor Juana from this edition by number of work and verse(s) or by page number for a prose work. In this case, *Los empeños de una casa* is a dramatic work in verse numbered 388 by Méndez Plancarte's system and I have cited verses 309–312 and 315–317.

<sup>8</sup> The *Carta atenagórica's* crucial importance to understanding final events leading to Sor Juana's abdication of her public writing career has been understood only in recent years. Several critical anthologies provide excellent explanations of the intricate interrelationships among the letter published without Sor Juana's permission by Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, in which she refutes the Portuguese Jesuit Viera's sermon on Christ's *finezas* (acts of love toward humans), the bishop's admonishment to her under the pseudonym Sor Filotea, her response some three months later in the incomparable *Respuesta* of March 1, 1691, and following events such as the performance of her defiantly feminist *Villancicos a Santa Catarina* in the Cathedral of Oaxaca and publication of the second edition of her works, in Madrid, in 1692. I believe the first and still one of the best collections of essays bringing to light these many interlaced meanings is K. Josu Bijjesca and Pablo A. J. Brescia, eds., *Sor Juana & Vieira, trescientos años después*. (Mexico: Center for Portuguese Studies, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Agustín de Salazar y Torres, *La segunda Celestina*. Ed. Guillermo Schmidhuber. (México: Vuelta, 1990) 45, 108–10. Camille Paglia demonstrates that amazons are fierce, autonomous females (178–79), much as Beatriz is presented in *Celestina*, and in general are seen as women "alone" (80). Their origins are androgynous (77).

<sup>10</sup> Note, Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 3: 699.

<sup>11</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 381: v. 152.

<sup>12</sup> Paglia 86–87.

<sup>13</sup> Paglia 248–50.

<sup>14</sup> Most of this translation is from Margaret Sayers Peden's *Poems, Protest, and a Dream*. (New York: Penguin, 1997) 125.

<sup>15</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 216: vv. 898–904.

<sup>16</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 222: vv. 2–7. The description, by the way, reflects traditional images of the Virgen of Guadalupe.

<sup>17</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 222: vv. 65–71.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Alliez and Michel Feher, "Reflections of a Soul." *Fragments for a History of the Human Body. Part Two*. Ed. Michel Feher. (New York: Zone, 1989) 47; Lacarrière 73; Andrew Welburn, *The Beginnings of Christianity: Essene Mystery, Gnostic Revelation and the Christian Vision* (Edinburgh: Floris, 1991) 190–91.

<sup>19</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 317: vv. 11–12.

<sup>20</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 48: vv. 93–108.

<sup>21</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 19: vv. 111–12.

<sup>22</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 37: vv. 31–32.

<sup>23</sup> Reyna 45–49.

<sup>24</sup> Poniatowska 264.

<sup>25</sup> Poniatowska 96.

<sup>26</sup> Poniatowska 19.

<sup>27</sup> María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990) 84–115.

<sup>28</sup> Claudette Williams, "Subtextuality in Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*." *Hispania* 77 (1994) 223. Other critics, however, readily assign androgynous status to Jesusa's manly demeanor and deliberately unfeminine behavior: Joel Hancock, "Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*: The Remaking of the Image of Woman." *Hispania* 66 (1983) 353–59; Arturo Pérez Pisonero, "Jesusa Palancares, esperpento femenino." *Mujer y literatura mexicana y chicanos: culturas en contacto*. Ed. Aralia López-González, Amelia Mala Gamba and Elena Urrutia. (Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1988) 221–29.

<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*, cited in Tracy Hargreaves, *Androgyny in Modern Literature*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 99–101.

<sup>30</sup> Jody L. Carlson and Patricia M. McGinn, "Sex-Role Orientation, Coping and Depression: A Further Look at Androgyny." Master's Thesis in Social Welfare. (University of California, Los Angeles, 1985) 33.

<sup>31</sup> Poniatowska 70.

<sup>32</sup> Poniatowska 90–91.

<sup>33</sup> Poniatowska 153.

<sup>34</sup> Poniatowska 154.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Isabel Lagarriga Attias, who mixes both terms throughout her *Medicina tradicional y espiritismo: los espiritualistas trinitarios marianos de Jalapa, Veracruz*. (Mexico: SEP/SETENTAS, 1975). Briefly, a fundamental distinction between the two sects is that spiritism attracts adepts from the more urbanized educated classes with less religious attitudes, while spiritualism,

at least at first, finds its followers among the popular, less educated, rural classes. See also "Spiritism and Spiritualism." *Encyclopedia of Mexico: History, Society and Culture. Vol. II.* Ed. Michael S. Werner. (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997) 1369–70.

<sup>36</sup> One means of achieving escape from the world is through rejection of the body and its passions, aspiring to perfect knowledge for direct access to the divine source. Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*. Trans. Anthony Alcock. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 8.

<sup>37</sup> Poniatowska 161.

<sup>38</sup> Madero lost his Catholic faith while in high school; in 1891 he embraced the faith of the *espiritistas* of Frenchman Allan Kardec. Madero, who eventually came to exercise his skill as a medium to communicate with invisible spirits, practiced clairvoyance, seeing into the past and the future, spirit curing and purifying exercises to dematerialize the body. His protector, the spiritualist José, helped him write the book he published just before he ran for president in 1910, *La sucesión presidencial* (The Presidential Succession) (1908). Madero believed that the Mexican Revolution took place thanks to the influence of spiritualists Raúl and José guiding Madero toward redemptive action. See José Natividad Rosales, *Madero y el espiritismo: las cartas y las sesiones espiritas del héroe* (Madero and Spiritualism: Letters and Spiritualist Sessions of the Hero) (Mexico: Posada, 1973).

<sup>39</sup> Poniatowska 164.

<sup>40</sup> Poniatowska 168.

<sup>41</sup> Poniatowska 10.

<sup>42</sup> Poniatowska 13.

<sup>43</sup> Poniatowska 23.

<sup>44</sup> Poniatowska 303.

<sup>45</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 216: v. 346.

<sup>46</sup> Poniatowska 12.

<sup>47</sup> Poniatowska 301.

<sup>48</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 405: 446.

<sup>49</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 405: 450. The translation is from the bilingual edition of Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell, *The Answer/La Respuesta*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1994) 57.

<sup>50</sup> Couliano 125–35. Couliano speaks of the "extraordinary freedom" of the gnostic mind, whose candid, honest, objective, logical and anti-traditional cast was a thorn in the totalitarian Christian church's side. The gnostics were considered heretical because of their "extreme mental activity." In a way, they sharpened Christianity, helping it "perfect" itself. All gnostic thought is highly intellectual and "elitist," especially as biblical exegesis.

<sup>51</sup> Paglia 43.

<sup>52</sup> Filoramo 72–74.

<sup>53</sup> Couliano 268–69.

<sup>54</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 216: vv. 263–91.

<sup>55</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 216: vv. 292–302.

<sup>56</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 90: vv. 13–16.

<sup>57</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 305: v. 30.

<sup>58</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 401: 357–402.

<sup>59</sup> Poniatowska 304.

<sup>60</sup> Poniatowska 305–307.

<sup>61</sup> Poniatowska 315.

<sup>62</sup> Poniatowska 316.

<sup>63</sup> In the *Libro de profesiones* of the convent of San Jerónimo, on one and the same page, Sor Juana had first, in 1669, using about a quarter of the page at the top, signed herself into the profession, so to speak; then, in 1694 and 1695, she had signed, using her own blood as ink, a reiteration of her vows and allegiance to the Virgin Mary (February 8, 1694) (Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 412: 522). Practically on top of that vow (in those days, paper was scarce and nuns tended to scribble over previous nuns' or their own inscriptions) we can more clearly see her famously self-flagellating vow: "Aquí arriba se ha de anotar el día de mi muerte, mes y año. Suplico, por amor de Dios y de su Purísima Madre, a mis amadas hermanas las religiosas que son y en lo de adelante fueren, me encomienden a Dios, que he sido y soy la peor que ha habido. A todas pido perdón por amor de Dios y de su Madre. Yo, la peor del mundo. Juana Inés de la Cruz" (Here above the day, month and year of my death are to be written. I beg you, my dearest religious sisters who are now and may be in future, for the love of God and his Most Pure Mother, to commend me to God, for I have been and am the worst nun that there has ever been. To all I beg forgiveness for the love of God and his Mother. I, the worst in the world. Juana Inés de la Cruz) (Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 413: 523).

<sup>64</sup> Elías Trabulse, *La muerte de Sor Juana* (México: Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Condumex, 1999). In this brief work, Trabulse summarizes findings recently publicized about books and other papers found in Sor Juana's convent cell which he says prove that she continued working as the institute's accountant (and continued to profit thereby), and had begun to rebuild her private library (by his reading of the documents, she had over 80 books at the time of her death) and was still writing, although of course nothing was being sent out for publication. Antonio Alatorre, however, disputes this interpretation of the inventory found in Sor Juana's cell, saying that it refers to a time when the nun was at the beginning of her career and had scarcely started to build her library. See his "Hacia una edición crítica de Sor Juana." (106–107).

<sup>65</sup> Neither the *Atenagórica* nor the *Respuesta* in Méndez Plancarte include Sor Filotea's letter; I cite from Georgina Sabat de Rivers and Elias Rivers, eds., *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: poesía, teatro, pensamiento: lírica personal, lírica coral, teatro, prosa*. (Madrid: Espasa; Biblioteca de Literatura Universal, 2004) 1451–54.

<sup>66</sup> "No mi voluntad, mi poca salud y mi justo temor han suspendido tantos días mi respuesta. ¿Qué mucho si, al primer paso, encontraba para tropezar mi torpe pluma dos imposibles? El primero (y para mí el más riguroso) es

saber responder a vuestra doctísima, discretísima, santísima y amorosísima carta. Y si veo que preguntado el Ángel de las Escuelas, Santo Tomás, de su silencio con Alberto Magno, su maestro, respondió que callaba porque nada sabía decir digno de Alberto, con cuánta mayor razón callaría, no como el Santo, de humildad, sino que en la realidad es no saber algo digno de vos. El segundo imposible es saber agradeceros tan excesivo como no esperado favor, de dar a las prensas mis borroneos: merced tan sin medida que aun se le pasara por alto a la esperanza más ambiciosa y al deseo más fantástico; y que ni aun como ente de razón pudiera caber en mis pensamientos; y en fin, de tal magnitud que no sólo no se puede estrechar a lo limitado de las voces, pero excede a la capacidad del agradecimiento, tanto por grande como por no esperado, que es lo que dijo Quintiliano: *Minorem spei, maiorem benefacti florum pereunt*. Y tal, que enmudecen al beneficiado" (It has not been my will, but my scant health and a rightful fear that have delayed my reply for so many days. Is it to be wondered that, at the very first step, I should meet with two obstacles that sent my dull pen stumbling? The first (and to me the most insuperable) is the question of how to respond to your immensely learned, prudent, devout, and loving letter. For when I consider how the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, on being asked of his silence before his teacher Albertus Magnus, responded that he kept quiet because he could say nothing worthy of Albertus, then how much more fitting it is that I should keep quiet—not like the Saint from modesty, but rather because, in truth, I am unable to say anything worthy of you. The second obstacle is the question of how to render my thanks for the favor, as excessive as it was unexpected, of giving my drafts and scratches to the press: a favor so far beyond all measure as to surpass the most ambitious hopes or the most fantastic desires, so that as a rational being I simply could not house it in my thoughts. In short, this was a favor of such magnitude that it cannot be bounded by the confines of speech and indeed exceeds all powers of gratitude, as much because it was so large as because it was so unexpected. In the words of Quintilian: "They produce less glory through hopes, more glory through benefits conferred." And so much so, that the recipient is struck dumb.) Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 405: 440. The translation is from Arenal and Powell 39.

<sup>67</sup> Sor Juana, *Obras completas* 405: 440.

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