

1985

# Some Thoughts on the Philosophy of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Luis Cortest

---

### Citas recomendadas

Cortest, Luis (Primavera 1985) "Some Thoughts on the Philosophy of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 21, Article 31.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/inti/vol1/iss21/31>

## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ

Luis Cortest

*Oklahoma State University*

Few writers in the history of Spanish-American literature are more philosophical than Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; her two most important prose works, the *Carta Atenagórica* and the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* are both obvious examples of this orientation. In the *Carta* we have the author's most outstanding philosophical text. In it, we find a clearly delineated statement of Sor Juana's philosophy of love. This work might best be described as a Neo-scholastic discussion of "divine" or "pure" love, informed by the most influential Neoplatonic doctrines of love of the author's time (those of Marsilio Ficino and Leone Hebreo). Both philosophical currents are present in the works of Sor Juana.

The *Respuesta*, dated March 1, 1691, is of the fundamental importance for all Sor Juana's scholars, since it is the author's intellectual biography. It is also a succinctly argued philosophical apology for the rights of women. This piece greatly reflects the principles and methods of Medieval and sixteenth-century Scholasticism.<sup>1</sup>

If, indeed, Sor Juana's two most important essays show the overwhelming influence of Scholasticism, the *Primero Sueño* and the sonnets reveal a strong Neoplatonic strain in the author's thought. These works, therefore, must also be studied if we are to arrive at a true understanding

of Sor Juana's philosophical temperament. This understanding is absolutely essential for our knowledge of Sor Juana's literature.

For a number of years scholars have argued about Sor Juana's philosophical orientation. Some time ago, Robert Ricard, the noted French hispanist, argued that one possible source for the *Sueño* may well have been the tradition of philosophical dream literature inspired by the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>2</sup> If one were to argue in favor of direct influence, it is certainly true that the works of Hermes Trismegistus could have reached Sor Juana through Ficino's Latin translation, which appeared in his *Opera Omnia*, first published in 1561.<sup>3</sup> Ricard, however, thought that this influence was indirect. More specifically, this body of philosophy was thought to have reached Sor Juana through the tradition of Classical Latin Poetry (Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* or perhaps Lucan's *Icaromenipo*) or through the tradition of Renaissance Neoplatonismo

Recently, Octavio Paz in his landmark work, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* turned the Hermetic texts into one of the principal sources for Sor Juana's thought. He also went to great lengths to show that the Hermetic tradition had reached Sor Juana through Athanasius Kircher.<sup>5</sup> Although Paz must be credited with an excellent observation regarding the poetic structure of the *Sueño* and the debt the work owes to Renaissance and Post-Renaissance dream literature, he was clearly mistaken in his interpretation of Sor Juana's philosophical sources.

In his 1984 "Discurso de ingreso a la Academia Mexicana" entitled, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz en el conocimiento de su Sueño*, José Pascual Buxó demonstrated that the most important philosophical source for Sor Juana in the *Sueño* was Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> He also clearly delineated the differences between the symbolic representations of the *Poimandres* and the *Iter Extaticum* (the Hermetic texts) and those of the *Sueño*:

Y en esto reside la principal diferencia — entre tantas coincidencias genéricas o episódicas — de los textos herméticos y *El sueño* de Sor Juana; éste es la narración del "vuelo intelectual" del alma por un universo conceptualmente constituido y simbólicamente representado, en tanto que el *Poimandres* o el *Iter Extaticum* son los relatos de las visiones de un mundo de símbolos a los que el alma concede — o pretende conceder — la condición de cosas reales. Así, las "imágenes" de Sor Juana representan nociones del intelecto por medio de los "simulacros" de la fantasía, en tanto que las "visiones" herméticas hacen de las Imágenes de la fantasía el sustento de nuevas representaciones metafóricas.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously these works, which seem to share a similar structural or stylistic form, are quite different philosophical statements. Sor Juana's philosophy in the *Sueño* is primarily and essentially Aristotelian.

One argument which is sometimes heard regarding Sor Juana is that she had a vocation to knowledge rather than to religious life. Octavio Paz, could probably be regarded as the chief exponent of this thesis. This position, however, at least in terms of internal logic, is problematic. One gets the feeling that a calling to knowledge or philosophy somehow precludes a vocation to religion. Obviously, this position would be absurd since the two vocations are in no way mutually exclusive. There have been countless members of religious orders who have also been called to pursue knowledge and philosophy. The case of the Dominicans who make up the renowned "Escuela salmantina" immediately comes to mind. Clearly, Vitoria, Soto, Báñez, Cano, to name only a few, were not only priests but great thinkers and outstanding philosophers. (Curiously, some people still believe that Spain never had any great philosophers.) When one is called to the religious life and to philosophy the result is often a call to the highest science, theology.

If we read the *Respuesta* carefully, we discover that Sor Juana herself had this vocation:

Con esto proseguí, dirigiendo siempre, como he dicho, los pasos de mi estudio a la cumbre de la Sagrada Teología; pareciéndome preciso, para llegar a ella, subir por los escalones de las ciencias y artes humanas; porque ¿cómo entenderá el estilo de la Reina de las Ciencias quien aun no sabe el de las ancuas? ¿Cómo sin Lógica sabría yo los métodos generales y particulares con que está escrita la Sagrada Escritura? ¿Cómo sin Retórica entenderla sus figuras, tropos y locuciones? ¿Cómo sin Física, tantas cuestiones naturales?<sup>8</sup>

We must not forget that Sor Juana never had the opportunity to pursue a career in theology because she was a woman. So great was her calling to that science, however, that she was able to write a refutation of the noted Jesuit Antonio de Vieira's sermon on the "finezas" of Christ. The title she gave this essay was "Crisis de un sermón". We know this piece by the name given to it by the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, who had the work published in 1691; the title, of course, is the *Carta Atenagórica*. This essay is as remarkable in its logical rigor as it is bold in its challenge to Father Vieira. In the *Respuesta* Sor Juana would ask why she could not challenge Vieira. She would also show her great intellectual courage in defending her position:

Si el crimen está en la *Carta Atenagórica*, ¿fue aquella más que referir sencillamente mi sentir con todas las venias que debo a nuestra Santa Madre Iglesia? Pues si ella, con su santísima autoridad, no me lo prohíbe, ¿por qué me lo han de prohibir otros? ¿Llevar una opinión contraria-de Vieira fue mi atrevimiento, y no lo fue en su Paternidad llevarla contra los tres Santos

Padres de la Iglesia? Mi entendimiento tal cual ¿no es tan libre como el suyo, pues viene de un solar? ¿Es alguno de los principios de la Santa Fe, revelados, su opinión, para que la hayamos de creer a ojos cerrados? (p. 468)

Sor Juana destroys her adversary's arguments with the greatest of ease, defending at the same time, positions held by St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps the most dangerous point, however, is that Sor Juana goes on to theorize about which "fineza" truly is the greatest. This is most assuredly the most dangerous thing that Sor Juana could have done. But what else could we expect from a mind called to philosophy? The challenge is there for Sor Juana to now offer her own solution to the problem she has shown Antonio de Vieyra incapable of solving.

If there is one thing we admire in Sor Juana, it is certainly her love of wisdom. This love, of course, is the love all those who are committed to philosophy feel so deeply. It is also in many instances the source of great suffering for the philosopher. In this regard, Sor Juana is no exception:

En todo lo dicho, venerable señora, no quiero (ni tal desatino cupiera en mf) decir que me han perseguido por saber, sino sólo porque he tenido amor a la sabiduría y a las letras, no porque haya conseguido ni uno ni otro. (p. 457)

Sor Juana, like Socrates, the father of Western Philosophy, cannot, because of her deep respect for wisdom, claim to be wise. Indeed, she is a lover of wisdom, but not its possessor. In the *Respuesta* Sor Juana discusses a specific instance in which her dedication to wisdom has resulted in disciplinary action taken against her:

Yo confieso que me hallo muy distante de los términos de la sabiduría y que la he deseado seguir, aunque a *longe*. Pero todo ha sido acercarme más al fuego de la persecución, al crisol del tormento; y ha sido con tal extremo que han llegado a solicitar que se me prohíba el estudio. Una vez lo consiguieron con una prelada muy santa y muy candida que creyó que el estudio era cosa de Inquisición y me mandó que no estudiase. Yo la obedecí (unos tres meses que duró el poder ella mandar) en cuanto a no tomar libro, (p. 458)

This action, however, is quite unsuccessful, since Sor Juana's desire to learn cannot be stopped by simply keeping her from reading books. Her natural thirst for knowledge enables her to study everything her mind perceives:

En cuanto a no estudiar absolutamente, como no cae debajo de mi potestad, no lo pude hacer, porque aunque no estudiaba en los libros, estudiaba en todas las cosas que Dios crió, sirviéndome ellas de letras, y de libro toda esta

máquina universal. Nada vela sin reflejar; nada ola sin consideración, aun en las cosas más menudas y materiales; porque como no hay criatura, por baja que sea, en que no se conozca el *me fecit Deus*, no hay alguna que no pame el entendimiento, si se considera como se debe. (p. 458)

Clearly, Sor Juana's urge to study and understand the world around her is a manifestation of her vocation to philosophy. She is called to love wisdom.

Surely one of the most profound images in the *Respuesta* is that of the crown of thorns as the crown of wisdom. In order for us to understand this image, we must remember that for Sor Juana, Christ is the embodiment of wisdom; he is wisdom incarnate. Therefore, the image of Christ crowned with thorns is also that of wisdom victimized by persecution and suffering. All those who are called to follow wisdom (that is, Christ) will be subjected to the same persecution:

Cuando los soldados hicieron burla, entretenimiento y diversión de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, trajeron una púrpura vieja y una caña hueca y una corona de espinas para coronarle por rey de burlas. Pues ahora, la caña y la púrpura eran afrentosas, pero no dolorosas; pues ¿por qué sólo la corona es dolorosa? ¿No basta que, como las demás insignias, fuese de escarnio e ignominia, pues ése era el fin? No, porque la sagrada cabeza de Cristo y aquel divino cerebro eran depósito de la sabiduría; y cerebro sabio en el mundo no basta que esté escarnecido, ha de estar también lastimado y maltratado; cabeza que es erarlo de sabiduría no espere otra corona que de espinas. ¿Cuál guirnalda espera la sabiduría humana si ve la que obtuvo la divina? (p. 455)

This image can also be interpreted as a symbol of Sor Juana's dual vocation. Her call is to Christ, since as a nun she is the bride of Christ, and to philosophy, which is the love of wisdom. Since Christ is wisdom for Sor Juana, she has no trouble responding to her double vocation.

It would be wrong for us to conclude somehow that Sor Juana was simply a lover of pagan philosophy. Although it is clear that she had a profound respect and admiration for the pagan philosophers, she was also a deeply religious person. Her philosophy, therefore, must also reveal her commitment to her faith. Only when we keep this fact in mind are we able to understand fully Sor Juana's philosophy. Her love of wisdom is equivalent to her love for God.

We must never forget that the overwhelming majority of sixteenth and seventeenth-century European (and Colonial) thinkers accept the Christian religion almost *a priori* as a part of objective reality. Sor Juana is no exception; she is a philosophical spirit who embraces the highest truth she understands, Christ. She is most probably what Etienne Giison would have called a "Christian philosopher".<sup>9</sup> Perhaps as well as anyone, Sor Juana knows what is to be persecuted because she loves wisdom. She also is well

aware of the fact that this contempt has a long and sad history. In the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana draws a parallel between the injustices of ancient Athens and those of her own time:

Aquella ley políticamente bárbara de Atenas, por la cual salta desterrado de su república el que se señalaba en prendas y virtudes porque no tiranizase con ellas la libertad pública, todavía dura, todavía se observa en nuestros tiempos, aunque no hay ya aquel motivo de los atenienses; pero hay otro, no menos eficaz aunque no tan bien fundado, pues parece máxima del impío Maquiavelo: que es aborrecer al que se señala porque desluce a otros. Así sucede y así sucedió siempre. (p. 453)

This return to Athens is most appropriate since Athens, as we all know, was the birthplace of our great philosophical tradition; it was also the site of the first great crime committed against philosophy.

## NOTAS

1 See Constance M. Montross, *Virtue or Vice? Sor Juana's Use of Thomistic Thought* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

2 Robert Ricard, *Une Poétesse mexicaine du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1957) p. 25.

3 See Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) p. 57.

4 Ricard, pp. 25-26.

5 Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982) pp. 476-480.

6 José Pascual Buxó, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz en el conocimiento de su Sueño* (México, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1984) pp. 53-61.

7 Buxó, p. 61.

8 *Obras completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, Vol. IV, ed. Alberto G. Salceda (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957) p. 447. All quotes from the *Respuesta* will be taken from this edition.

9 See Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936) pp. 20-41.