Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) was born at San Miguel de Nepantla, Mexico, to Isabel Ramirez, an independent, self-reliant woman who managed a farm and gave birth to six children. Sor Juana is said to have learned to read at three and was writing by five. Her reading she put to good use in her grandfather’s library, so that when her mother sent her to Mexico City at the age of 12, people were amazed by the extent of Sor Juana’s learning. At this time, little thought was given to the education of women, and the barriers encountered by a woman seeking an education were considerable.

Sor Juana’s intellectual skills drew the attention of the Viceroy, the Marquis de Mancera, and his wife, Leonor Carreto, who invited her to the court as a maid in waiting. With five years at court, Sor Juana developed into a witty, learned woman, writing poetry and plays, and well equipped with social skills. She entered the Convent of the Discalced Carmelites in 1667 but left for the Convent of the Sisters of Saint Hieronymus in 1669, where she remained for the rest of her life. It was at this convent that she gained her full name of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She was able to continue her studies, build up a library, and maintain her friendships in the intellectual world outside of the convent. She wrote poetry and carols, two secular plays, and a sacramental play. In the convent, her skills were applied to secretarial, archival, and other tasks. As a means of obtaining support, entry into a convent would be normal for a woman who had no dowry or aristocratic background.

The next viceroy, Marquis de la Laguna, and his wife Maria Luisa, Countess de Paredes, also enjoyed friendship with Sor Juana. On her return to Spain, the countess supervised publication of a compilation of Sor Juana’s poetry, giving it the title, The Overflowing of the Castalian Spring, by the Tenth Muse of Mexico (1699).

In conversation, Sor Juana criticized a sermon delivered by a Portuguese Jesuit, Antonio de Viera some forty years earlier. The Bishop of Puebla asked Sor Juana to put her argument in writing. When she did so, in 1691, he published it without her knowledge or permission, giving it the title Carta Atenagorica (Essay worthy of Athena), but prefaced it with an admonishing letter under the pseudonym Sor Philothea de la Cruz. What the reverent gentleman was up to in this exercise in intellectual cross-dressing is a matter for conjecture. But it gave the opportunity to Sor Juana to reply with an eloquent plea for the education of women, adding many details of her own painful path to learning. Below are extracts from Sor Juana’s Reply to Sor Philothea.

Sor Juana died of the plague in 1695, while taking care of her sick sisters in the convent.

Love of Learning
1 If my crime lies in the Letter Worthy of Athena, was that anything more than a simple report of my opinion, with all the indulgences granted me by our Holy Mother Church? For if She, with her most holy authority, does not forbid my writing, why must others forbid it? Is it bold of me to oppose Vieira, yet not so for that Reverend Father to oppose the three holy Fathers of the Church? Is my mind, such as it is, less free than his, though it derives from the same source? Is his opinion to be taken as one of the principles of the Holy Faith make manifest, that we must believe it blindly? Besides which, I have not in
the slightest way fallen short of that respect owed such a great man, as his defender has
done in this instance, forgetting the observation of Titus Lucius, "Decorum befits the
arts." Nor did I write for anyone other than the person who suggested it to me; and
according to Pliny, "The situation of one who publishes a thing is different from that of
one who speaks it in his own name." For had I thought the letter was to be published, it
would not have appeared as unkempt as it was.

2  I became a nun because, although I knew I would find in religious life many things
that would be quite opposed to my character (I speak of accessory rather than essential
matters), it would—given my absolute unwillingness to enter into marriage—be the least
unfitting and the most decent state I could choose, with regard to the assurance I desired
of my salvation. For before this first concern (which is, at the last, the most important),
all the impertinent little follies of my character gave way and bowed to the yoke. These
were wanting to live alone and not wanting to have either obligations that would disturb
my freedom to study or the noise of a community that would interrupt the tranquil silence
of my books.

3  I thought I was fleeing myself but, alas, I brought myself with me, and brought my
greatest enemy in my inclination to study, which I know not whether to take as a heaven-
sent favor or as a punishment. For when snuffed out or suppressed with every observation
known to religion, it exploded like gunpowder. And in my case the saying "privation
produces appetite" was proven true. I went back (no, I speak incorrectly, for I never
stopped)— I mean I went on with my studious regime (which to me was peace and rest in
every moment left over when my duties were done) of reading and still more reading,
study and still more study, with no teacher besides my books themselves. What a
hardship it is to learn from those lifeless letters, deprived of the sound of a teacher's voice
and explanations; yet I suffered all these trials most gladly for the love of learning.

Acquisition of Fundamentals

4  I went on in this way, always directing each step of my studies, as I have said, toward
the holy summit of theology. But it seemed to me necessary to ascend by the ladder of
humanistic arts and sciences in order to reach it. For who could fathom the style of the
queen of sciences without knowing those of her handmaidens? Without logic, how should
I know the general and specific methods by which Holy Scripture is set down? Without
rhetoric, how should I understand its figures, tropes, and locutions? Or how, without
physics or natural science, understand all the questions that naturally arise concerning the
varied natures of those animals offered in sacrifice, in which a great many things already
make manifest are symbolized, and many more besides?

How, without a thorough knowledge of the order and divisions by which history is
composed, is one to understand the historical books—as in those summaries, for
example, which often postpone the narration what in fact happened first? How, without
command of the two branches of law, should one understand the Books of Law?

And so, to acquire a few basic principles of knowledge, I studied constantly a variety
of subjects, having no inclination toward any one of them in particular but being drawn
rather to all of them generally. Therefore, if I have studied some things more than others
it has not been by my choice, but because by chance books on certain subjects came more
readily to hand, and this gave preference to their topics, without my reaching a judgment
in the matter. I had no particular interest to spur me, nor had I any limit to my time to
compel me to reduce the continuous study of one subject, as is required in taking a
degree. Thus almost at one sitting I would study diverse things or leave off some to take
up others. Yet even in this I maintained a certain order, for some subjects I called my
study and others my diversion, and with the latter I would take my rest from the former.

Hardships of Solitary Study

5 What could, however, serve to excuse me would be the great trial I have undergone in
lacking not only a teacher, but fellow students with whom to review and practice what
had been studied. For my only teacher was a mute book, my only schoolfellow an
unfeeling inkwell. And instead of explanations and exercises I had interruptions, posed
not only by my religious duties (for it is well known how usefully and beneficially these
take up one's time), but by all those other things incidental to life in a religious
community—when I would be reading and the nuns in the next cell would decide to sing
and play music. Or I would be reading and two arguing maidservants would come to me
to arbitrate their dispute. Or, as I was writing, a friend would come to visit me, doing me
a very bad turn with very good intentions. So that one must not only make way for the
interruption but give thanks for the harm done.

6 And from this, too, it may easily be inferred just how my poor studies have had to
make their way (or, to be more exact, have foundered) in steering against the current. For
I have yet to tell the most strenuous of my difficulties. Those accounted for to this point
have been no more than hindrances caused by my obligations or by chance. Posed
indirectly, they are not purposeful obstacles directly aimed at impeding and prohibiting
my training. Who would not think, hearing such widespread applause, that I had sailed
before the wind over a sea smooth as glass, upon the cheers of universal acclaim?

Yet God Himself knows it has not quite been so, because, among the blossoms of that
very acclaim, asps of rivalry and persecution have roused and reared themselves up, more
than I could possibly count. And the most venomous and hurtful to me have not been
those who with explicit hatred and ill-will have persecuted me. Rather it has been those
persons, loving me and desiring my good (and, therefore, greatly deserving before God
for their good intentions), who have mortified and tormented me more than any others,
with, "All this study is not fitting, for holy ignorance is your duty; she shall go to
perdition, she shall surely be cast down from such heights by that same wit and
cleverness." How was I to bear up against this? A strange martyrdom indeed, where I
must be both martyr and my own executioner!

Well, as for this aptitude at composing verses—which is doubly unfortunate, in my
case, even should they be sacred verses—what unpleasantness have they not caused me,
and indeed do they not still cause?

7 Any eminence is unhappy, whether of dignity, nobility, wealth, beauty, or learning.
But it is high intelligence that lacks defense. First, because wealth and power punish
those who confront them, while intelligence does not. Indeed, the greater it is, the more
modest and long-suffering intelligence becomes and the less it defends itself. Second,
because, as Gracian said with great erudition, "The advantages of intelligence are
advantages of being." The angel is superior to man for no other reason than that the angel is more intelligent; man surpasses the beast in no other way but intelligence. And thus, as no one wants to be less than another, no one will admit that another is more intelligent, for being less intelligent follows logically from the other’s being more so. Anyone will suffer the admission that another is nobler than himself, wealthier, more beautiful, and even more learned; but there are few indeed who will admit that another possesses superior powers of mind. "It is the rare man who will concede another’s greater intelligence." That is why attack is so successful against this particular talent.

**Studying Without Books**

8 I confess that I am far indeed from being on familiar terms with knowledge and that I have wished to approach it, though from afar. But all this has merely led me closer to the flames of persecution, the crucible of affliction—to such an extreme that some have even sought to prohibit me from study. They achieved this once, through a very saintly and simple mother superior, who believed that study was an affair for the Inquisition and ordered that I should not read. I obeyed her (for the three months or so that her authority over us lasted) in that I did not pick up a book. But with regard to avoiding study absolutely, as such a thing does not lie within my power, I could not do it. For although I did not study in books, I studied all the things that God created, taking them for my letters, and for my book all the intricate structures of this world. I could see nothing without reflecting upon it, I could hear nothing without pondering it, even the most minute, material things.

9 This trait, whether a matter of nature or custom, is such that nothing do I see without a second thought. Two little girls were playing with a top in front of me. No sooner had I seen the motion and shape than I began, with this madness of mine, to observe the easy movement of the spherical form and how the momentum lasted, now fixed and set free of its cause. For even far from its first cause, which was the hand of the girl, the little top went on dancing. Yet not content with this, I ordered flour to be brought and sifted on the floor, so that as the top danced over it, we could know whether its movement described perfect circles or not. I found they were not circular, but rather spiral lines that lost their circularity as the top lost its momentum.

10 What is more, my Lady, not even my sleep has been free of this ceaseless movement of my imagination. Rather, my mind operates in sleep still more freely and with even less obstruction, ordering with greater clarity and ease the events it has preserved from the day, presenting arguments and composing verses. I could give you a very long catalogue of these, as I could of certain reasoning or subtle recognitions I have achieved far better in my sleep than while awake. But I leave them out in order not to weary you. I have said enough for your judgment and your surpassing eminence to comprehend my nature with clarity and full understanding, together with the beginnings, the methods, and the present state of my studies.

If studies, my Lady, be merits (for indeed I see them extolled as such in men), in me they are no such thing: I study because I must. If they be a failing, I believe for the same reason that the fault is none of mine.

**Precedents for Learned Women**
11 I confess also that, while in truth this inclination has been such that, as I said before, I had no need of exemplars, nevertheless the many books that I have read have not failed to help me, both in sacred as well as secular letters. For there I see a Deborah issuing laws, military as well as political, and governing the people among whom there were so many learned men. I see the exceedingly knowledgeable Queen of Sheba, so learned she dares to test the wisdom of the wisest of all wise men with riddles, without being rebuked for it. Indeed, on this very account she is to become judge of the unbelievers. I see so many and such significant women: some adorned with the gift of prophecy, like an Abigail; others, of persuasion, like Esther; others, of piety, like Rahab; others, of perseverance, like Anna the mother of Samuel; and others, infinitely more, with other kinds of qualities and virtues.

12 If I consider the Gentiles, the first I meet are the Sibyls, chosen by God to prophesy the essential mysteries of our faith in such learned and elegant verses that they stupefy the imagination. I see a woman such as Minerva, daughter of great Jupiter and mistress of all the wisdom of Athens, adored as goddess of the sciences. I see one Polla Argentaria, who helped Lucan, her husband, to write the Battle of Pharsalia. I see the daughter of the divine Tiresias, more learned still than her father. I see, too, such a woman as Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrans, as wise as she was courageous. Again, I see an Arete, daughter of Aristippus, most learned. A Nicostrata, inventor of Latin letters and most erudite in the Greek. An Aspasia of Miletus, who taught philosophy and rhetoric and was the teacher of the philosopher Pericles. An Hypatia, who taught astrology and lectured for many years in Alexandria. A Leoncia, who won over the philosopher Theophrastus and proved him wrong. A Julia, a Corinna, a Cornelia; and, in sum, the vast throng of women who merited titles and earned renown: as Greeks, muses, or oracles. For what were they all but learned women, who were considered, celebrated, and indeed venerated as such in antiquity?

Benefits of Education for Women

13 The venerable Dr. Arce (a worthy professor of scripture, known for his virtue and learning), in his For the Scholar of the Bible, raises this question: "Is it permissible for women to apply themselves to the study, and indeed the interpretation, of the Holy Bible?" And in opposition he presents the verdicts passed by many saints, particularly the words of the Apostle [Paul]: "Let women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted them to speak," etc. Arce then presents differing verdicts, including this passage addressed to Titus, again spoken by the Apostle: "The aged women, in like manner, in holy attire . . . teaching well "; and he gives other interpretations from the Fathers of the Church. Arce at last resolves, in his prudent way, that women are not allowed to lecture publicly in the universities or to preach from the pulpits, but that studying, writing, and teaching privately is not only permitted but most beneficial and useful to them.

14 Oh, how many abuses would be avoided in our land if the older women were as well instructed as Leta and knew how to teach as is commanded by St. Paul and my father St. Jerome! Instead, for lack of such learning and through the extreme feebleness in which they are determined to maintain our poor women, if any parents then wish to give their
daughters more extensive Christian instruction than is usual, they are obliged by
necessity and the lack of learned older women to employ men as instructors to teach
reading and writing, numbers and music, and other skills. This leads to considerable
harm, which occurs every day in wretched instances of these unsuitable associations. For
the immediacy of such contact and the passage of time all too frequently allow what
seemed impossible to be accomplished quite easily. For this reason, many parents prefer
to let their daughters remain uncivilized and untutored, rather than risk exposing them to
such notorious peril as this familiarity with men. Yet all this could be avoided if there
were old women of sound education, as St. Paul desires, so that instruction could be
passed from the old to the young just as is done with sewing and all the customary skills.

15 All that I have desired has been to study, so as to become less ignorant. For
according to St. Augustine, some things are learned so as to act on them, and others
simply for the sake of knowing them: "We learn certain things in order to know them;
others in order to do them." Then where is my transgression, if I refrain even from that
which is permissible for women—to teach by writing—because I know myself to lack the
abundant talent needed for it, following Quintilian's counsel: "Let each one learn, no so
much by the precepts of others, as by following the counsel of his own nature"?

Poetry Does Not Deserve Censure

16 Now, if I turn my eyes to my much-maligned skill at writing in verse, it is so natural
to me that indeed I must force myself not to write this very letter in rhyme, and I could
observe as another did, "Whatever I tried to say came out in verse" [Ovid]. Seeing this
facility for writing poems condemned by so many and so vilified, I have sought quite
deliberately to discover what harm there might be in it, and I cannot. Rather, I see it
praised in the mouths of the Sibyls and sanctified by the pens of the Prophets, especially
that of King David, of whom the great expositor, my own beloved Father {Jerome}, says
in scanning the measures of his meters: "In the style of Horace and Pindar, now it runs in
iambics, now it resounds in the alcaic measure, now it swells in sapphics, now it moves
slowly forward in half-feet." The greater part of our sacred books are written in meter,
like the Canticle of Moses; and most of Job, according to the Etymologies of St. Isidore,
is in heroic verse. Solomon wrote poetry in the Epithalamia, as did Jeremiah in his
Lamentations. Cassiodorus says the following: "All poetic speech had its origins in the
Holy Scriptures." Indeed, our own Catholic Church, far from spurning verses, employs
them in her hymns and recites those of St. Ambrose, St. Thomas, St. Isidore, and others.

17 Now if the evil lies in verses being used by a woman, since we have just seen how
many women have used them most laudably, what evil lies in my using them? I confess
straightway my rough and uncouth nature; but I wager not a soul has seen an indecent
verse of mine. What is more, I have never written a single thing of my own volition, but
rather only in response to the pleadings and commands of others. So much so that I recall
having written nothing at my own pleasure save a trifling thing they call the Dream. The
letter that you so honored, my Lady, I wrote with greater abhorrence than anything else.
This was because it treated sacred matters for which (as I have said) I hold such reverent
awe; and, too, because it would appear to be an attempt at refutation, to which I have a
natural aversion.
Sources:

Adapted from La Respuesta/The Answer, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz page, University of Arizona Web Site.

A Sor Juana Anthology, translated by Alan S. Trueblood, with a foreword by Octavio Paz. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988. This contains a biography and examples of Sor Juana's poetry and prose.

Some of Trueblood's translations of Sor Juana's poems are at the Old Poetry website.

Introduction and adaptation of extracts Copyright © Rex Pay 2004