On Men’s Hypocrisy

Sor Juana

Women, by all accounts, occupied a decidedly subordinate position in colonial Mexico. It is ironic, then, that one of the most distinguished poets and intellectuals of the period was a Jeronymite nun, Sor [Sister] Juana Inés de la Cruz (not to be confused with Fray García’s solicitous friend in the previous selection). Born in 1648 in a small village in Puebla, to unmarried parents in very modest economic circumstances, she early evidenced precocious talents that brought her to the attention of the viceroy and his wife, who took the prodigy into their court as a maid-in-waiting. Her natural brilliance and insatiable thirst for knowledge led her to shun the accepted course for women in her day—marriage—opting instead to enter a convent (in 1669) where she would be relatively free to pursue her intellectual and artistic inclinations. The cloistered life in colonial Mexico was not necessarily ascetic, and Sor Juana was able to build a substantial library, read and write prodigiously, and socialize with many of the most illustrious personages of the day. In 1690 the Bishop of Puebla censured her for neglecting religious in favor of profane subjects, and for behaving in ways inappropriate to her sex and vocation. In response, she wrote an intellectual autobiography, the “Reply to Sor Philothea,” perhaps her most famous single piece of writing. In this remarkable letter, Sor Juana ostensibly repents her aberrant ways, even while clearly celebrating the life of the mind. The Bishop’s chastisement, however, compelled her to cease her writing, give away her books and musical and scientific instruments, and devote herself to charitable work and extreme acts of penance and mortification. She died in 1695, the victim of a plague that swept Puebla in that year.

While much of Sor Juana’s poetry contains the flowery language and intricate symbolism characteristic of the Baroque style, the poem we include here—a comment on the famous sexual double-standard—is written in a playful vein, even while it is quite serious in its intent.

Silly, you men—so very adept
at wrongly faulting womankind,
not seeing you’re alone to blame
for faults you plant in woman’s mind.
After you’ve won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name,
you still expect her to behave—
you, that coaxed her into shame.

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

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

Presumptuous beyond belief,
you’d have the woman you pursue
be Thais¹ when you’re courting her,
Lucretia² once she falls to you.

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

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

With you, no woman can hope to score;
whichever way, she’s bound to lose;
spurning you, she’s ungrateful;
succumbing, you call her lewd.

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

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

Still, whether it’s torment or anger—
and both ways you’ve yourselves to blame—
God bless the woman who won’t have you,
no matter how loud you complain.
It's your persistent entreaties
that change her from timid to bold.
Having made her thereby naughty,
you would have her good as gold.

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

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

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

If you'd give up pursuing them,
you'd discover, without a doubt,
you've a stronger case to make
against those who seek you out.
    I well know what powerful arms
you wield in pressing for evil:
your arrogance is allied
with the world, the flesh, and the devil!

Notes

1. Thais: Semi-historic Athenian courtesan who is said to have been mistress of Alexander on his Asiatic conquests, and later mistress of the king of Egypt. Ed.
2. Lucretia: In Roman legend, a matron renowned for her virtue, who stabbed herself to death after being raped. Ed.