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‘The Worst of All’: The Intellectual Authorization of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and the Lady
Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of History and Global Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Savannah Weeks

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has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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Abstract:

This paper examines and compares the lives, writings, and reputations of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and the Lady Margaret Cavendish. Both women were philosophers in the 17th century and both women were criticized widely by their contemporaries. Within this paper, I analyze the ways in which Sor Juana and Cavendish were similar: namely within their social status, their education, and both women's lack of activism, despite often being referred to as early feminists. This paper also looks at the ways in which Sor Juana and Cavendish were authorized to write. Most of the authorization comes from their most immediate male mentors and their 17th century audience, however both women also utilized rhetorical modes of self-authorization. All of these forms of authorization will be analyzed within historical context through the use of these women's 17th century writings as well as through secondary sources authored by scholars in the fields of history and literature.

Near the end of her life in 1694, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz of New Spain reaffirmed her vows as a nun, famously signing her name in her own blood: “Yo, la Peor de Todas” (“I, the Worst of all”). This visceral sentiment followed a scandal revolving around her intellectual pursuits and theological criticisms. Across the Atlantic some 20 years earlier Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle had also received criticism and ridicule because of her intellectual pursuits, including a journey into the world of natural philosophy. Both of these remarkable 17th century women were pioneers in the field of philosophy as some of the first women to not only write in this genre, but also to actively publish and proliferate their writings throughout England, Spain, and New Spain. Within their writing and their lives, it is their boldness which makes them comparable.

This bold attitude was not met without complications. Because women in the 17th century world were considered fundamentally weaker and less intelligent than men, Sor Juana and Margaret Cavendish had to acquire a certain degree of authorization to write. They received authorization from multiple external sources, the most influential of which were their most immediate male superiors. Both women also participated in a great deal of self-authorization through a variety of rhetorical channels. However, the authorization and self-authorization that Sor Juana and Cavendish utilized did not have the desired effect and both women were essentially ridiculed and persecuted for their intellectual pursuits by their male counterparts.

Juana Ines de Asbaje (1651-1695) was born in a small village near the city of Nepantla, in New Spain (modern day Mexico). Her family were small landowners in the stratified society of New Spain.¹ A defining feature of Sor Juana’s life and social class

¹ Ilan Stavans, “Introduction,” in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream*, ed. and trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Penguin, 1996), xxiii.

was her status as an illegitimate child. While she never discusses this in her autobiographical accounts of her life, she was registered for baptism as a “daughter of the church,” which was 17th century short-hand for illegitimacy.² Scholars know very little about Sor Juana’s early life except for the events she recorded in her most famous work – *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (written in 1691 and published in 1700, five years after her death). Sor Juana’s father does not appear in *La Respuesta* and scholars do not know to what level he was present in Sor Juana’s life. However, to many scholars who study her life, including Octavio Paz and Ilan Stavans, the “enigma of the paternal figure is central...to her life.”³ Having an absent father and being of illegitimate birth—and therefore considered a lower class in the highly stratified society of New Spain—raises questions about her worldview. Did her illegitimacy and displacement within New Spanish society influence Sor Juana’s habit of writing harshly about the world she inhabited?

Isabel Ramirez, Sor Juana’s mother, features prominently in the early parts of Sor Juana’s life. In Juana Ines’ personal account, she writes that she “was not yet three years old when [her] mother determined to send one of [her] elder sisters to learn to read at a school for girls we call the *Amigas*.”⁴ These “*Amigas*” (literally translates to “female friends”) were most likely local women who taught basic literacy to girls in remote areas like Nepantla. Aside from these local secular schools, a select few girls could attend

² Pamela Kirk Rappaport, “Introduction,” in *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 7.

³ Stavans, “Introduction,” xxiii.

⁴ Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, “La Respuesta a Sor Filotea,” in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream*, ed. and trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Penguin, 1996), 13.

convent schools, while the very rich could hire private tutors. Aside from Sor Juana's basic literacy, she was primarily an autodidact. She attempted to attain higher levels of education in unorthodox ways. In *La Respuesta* she writes:

“When later, being six or seven, and having learned how to read and write, along with all the other skills of needlework and household arts that girls learn, it came to my attention that in Mexico City there were Schools, and a University, in which one could study sciences. The moment I heard this, I began to plague my mother with insistent and importunate pleas: She should dress me in boy's clothing and send me to Mexico City to live with relatives, to study and be tutored at the University. She would not permit it, and she was wise...”⁵

Juana Ines continues to explain how she taught herself Latin with occasional help from a tutor in Latin. Sor Juana's own story of self-education appears frequently in her later literature and philosophy where she writes about and, according to some who interpret Sor Juana, advocates for female education and literacy.

While she was predominantly self-taught, Sor Juana spent most of her life surrounded by greater educational opportunities than most women. As a teenager, she was presented to the court of the Viceroy of New Spain. The vicereine, Leonor Carreto, hand-picked Juana Ines to be her lady in waiting. The period of her life spent in the court gave her more access to education than she had in Nepantla. Most importantly, though, her time in the royal court offered Juana Ines exposure to the world at large as people realized how gifted and bright she was. When a group of scholars examined her intellect and she “defended herself like a galleon against a slew of canoes.”⁶ While living at court,

⁵ de la Cruz, “La Respuesta,” 15.

⁶ Rappaport, “Introduction,” 8.

she composed many sonnets at the behest of the vicereine. Her close relationship with the state and the vicereine continued after she abandoned her life there and took her vows as a nun.⁷

The situations behind Juana Ines' entrance into convent life are relatively murky. She says that she joined the convent because it was the "least repugnant" of life for a woman, especially because she had a "total antipathy" for marriage. In what seems almost an afterthought, Juana Ines wrote in the same paragraph that joining the convent was a way to secure her salvation.⁸ While it has never been proven that her status of illegitimacy affected possible marriage prospects for Juana Ines, the marriage prospects of any illegitimate daughter were dim. It is therefore safe to conclude that Juana Ines had few options which would allow her to maintain the privileged status she had enjoyed for most of her life. After a brief stay in the extremely ascetic convent of Carmelite nuns, Juana Ines de Asbaje joined the Hieronymites and became Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Because convents only allowed the entrance of criollo women of pure birth, she falsified her records and called herself legitimate.⁹ Similar to how joining the court of the vice regency gave her more acclaim than most illegitimate girls could hope for, joining the convent of the Hieronymites awarded her a higher social status than she could ever have

⁷ Despite the fact that she was of illegitimate birth, her aunt and uncle, whom she lived with before entering the court life, were of a relatively high class. Here, her class slightly outweighs the status of illegitimacy. Within the society of New Spain, illegitimate children were fairly common, and it was better to be an illegitimate criollo than a person of mixed race. Therefore, while Sor Juana's status of illegitimacy certainly influenced her life and kept her from reaching the complete upper echelons of society, she could still exist within the world of the privileged few because she was criolla.

⁸ de la Cruz, "La Respuesta," 17.

⁹ Stavans, "Introduction," xxxvi.

attained as the wife of a middle or lower ranked Spaniard or mestizo.¹⁰ Without a place within the world of the upper-class, Sor Juana would never have achieved the fame that she did.

As is the case with Sor Juana, the lady Margaret Cavendish (née Lucas), Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673) would never have achieved her level of infamy and intelligence without her firm seat among the peers of 17th century England.¹¹ Margaret Lucas was born in 1623 to a lower gentry family. Her mother and father experienced scandal at an early age when they had their first child out of wedlock.¹² Margaret was the youngest of many children, and her father died when she was extremely young. Most of what is known about Margaret Cavendish's early years comes from her autobiography appended to the biography she wrote about her husband.

Female education in England was even more limited than it was in New Spain. Although having a female monarch a few years earlier (Elizabeth I) appeared to help the plight of girls' education, very little changed in the way of practical solutions and most girls remained uneducated aside from functional literacy.¹³ In the 1530s, all monasteries and convents in England had been dissolved; as a result, convent schools were not an option unless parents sent their daughters to the European continent.¹⁴ Similar to most

¹⁰ Rappaport, "Introduction," 9.

¹¹ Londa Schiebinger, "Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle," in *A History of Women Philosophers: Volume III, Modern Women Philosophers, 1600-1900*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 1.

¹² Mona Narain, "Notorious Celebrity: Margaret Cavendish and the Spectacle of Fame," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 42, no. 2 (2009): 77.

¹³ Miriam Balmuth, "Female Education in 16th and 17th Century England," *Les Cahiers de la Femme* 9, no. 3 (m.d.): 19.

¹⁴ Laura Lunger Knoppers, *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89.

upper-class girls of her time, Margaret received education suited for a lady. She learned very few intellectual skills, with her tutors focusing mainly on singing, dancing, needlepoint, and basic literacy.¹⁵ Because of her wealth, Cavendish had private tutors and educational opportunities not afforded to most. She moved beyond her basic literacy and learned on her own.

Margaret Cavendish's intellectual pursuits are often overshadowed by her search for fame and recognition in whatever way possible, however both were tied very closely together. When she was a teenager, she became the lady in waiting for Queen Henrietta Marie, the wife of King Charles the I. Similar to the upward mobility of Sor Juana, Cavendish used this opportunity to move from the lower gentry into the higher-class world of the peers. When the King and Queen were banished to the continent, Margaret went with them. It was in Europe among the banished court that she met William Cavendish, a duke who had exiled himself after a great military defeat.¹⁶

Following her marriage to William, the newly named Margaret Cavendish began to focus more on her philosophical and literary works. Although she spent a great deal of time in the academic hub of France, she had few intellectual companions aside from her

¹⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *The Life of William Cavendish, duke of Newcastle, to which is added The True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life* (London: J.C. Nimmo, 1886), 280, <https://archive.org/details/lifeofwilliamca00newcuoft>.

¹⁶ Charles I fought in the English Civil War, but lost and was promptly executed in 1649. Henrietta Marie was exiled to her birthplace of France where she remained until her son, Charles II was restored to the throne. William Cavendish was the tutor for Charles II and a royalist, therefore he also went into exile after the civil war. It was during this period of exile that Margaret Lucas met William Cavendish. See: Christina Mason Sutherland, "Aspiring to Rhetorical Tradition: A Study of Margaret Cavendish," in *Listening to their Voices: Essays on the Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer, 255-271, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 257.

husband.¹⁷ She even makes a point to mention that she “seldom receive[s] visits,” within the text of her autobiography.¹⁸ She did not seek female companionship, often reprimanding “the ladies of her day for ‘playing at cards’ and not being delighted in...Philosophy.”¹⁹ Cavendish instead surrounded herself with the intelligent men she knew, acknowledging that at the time a woman’s “greatest access to knowledge...was through men.”²⁰ With help from her husband, Cavendish began publishing her own work and circulating it throughout England. However, very few of her contemporaries engaged her in any serious correspondence and most of her philosophical theories and debates were one way. However, she was a philosophically bold woman.²¹

It is the boldness of both Margaret Cavendish and Sor Juana which join the two together in a comparative paper. Although they may have lived in different countries, written in different languages, and played out completely different roles as women in relation to men, they both brazenly challenged the ideals of their day and were scorned for their opinions, though one less so than the other. Their works are comparable in content and polemic. First and foremost, they both wrote little of religion, despite the fact that the most common genre of female writing at the time was devotional writing.²²

¹⁷ David Norbrook, “Women, the Republic of Letters, and the Public Sphere in the Mid-Seventeenth Century,” *Criticism* 46, no. 2 (2004): 227.

¹⁸ Cavendish, *The Life of William*, 267.

¹⁹ Schiebinger, “Margaret Cavendish,” 3

²⁰ Schiebinger, “Margaret Cavendish,” 1.

²¹ Schiebinger, “Margaret Cavendish,” 5.

²² For more information, see: Susan Comilang, “Through the Closet: Private Devotion and the Shaping of Female Subjectivity in the Religious Recess,” *Renaissance & Reformation* 27, no. 3 (2003): 79-96.

Though Sor Juana was a nun, the vast majority of her popular work was secular in nature. Her secularism was one of the main grievances given against her by not only her confessor, Father Nunez de Miranda, but also by the Bishop in his letter rebuking Sor Juana.²³ Margaret Cavendish was also criticized for the secular nature of her writings. Many of Cavendish's contemporaries believed her to be an atheist. Though she said on multiple occasions that she was not, modern scholars do accept that she was at the very least a religious skeptic.²⁴ Cavendish and Sor Juana practiced their respective non-religious writing in the "ideological minefields" of two very divided countries.²⁵ The English were engaged in a seemingly never ending period of civil war flanked by the Cromwellian Protectorate and the persecution of dissenters (Catholics). The government of New Spain was at odds with the church and the Inquisition was ravaging the country. It is unsurprising that in two societies so obsessed with finding and destroying dissenters that these two secular women would be the target of intense criticism.

Similarly, neither woman fights against any existing class structures. Both exhibit an awareness of their positions as women in the circle of the aristocracy and readily accept the advantages afforded to them as a result of their class. New Spain and England were two areas of the world that had completely static class structures that these women had, in some form or fashion, circumvented. Cavendish was born to the lower gentry but

²³ Stavans, "Introduction," xiv.

²⁴ Holly Faith Nelson, "A Good Christian, and a Good Natural Philosopher: Margaret Cavendish's Theory of the Soul(s) in the Early Enlightenment," *Studies in Philology* 113, no. 4 (2016): 947-8.

²⁵ Nelson, "A Good Christian," 953.

maneuvered her way up into the Queen's court and married a Duke.²⁶ Sor Juana achieved even greater upwards mobility as she went from an illegitimate child in Nepantla to the court of the viceregency to the exclusive and elite Hieronymite convent. Neither woman attempts to speak out against the class structure she, in her own right, thwarted. For Margaret Cavendish, "the right to power for women... is a privilege attendant upon birth and status," therefore her writing fully supports the class order of England.²⁷ In New Spain, class and race were tightly intertwined, with the highest order being white *peninsulars* (Spaniards born in Spain) and the lowest being indigenous people or African slaves. The indigenous language, Nahuatl, was not commonly employed by people other than the indigenous. Because she grew up in an area with a heavy indigenous presence, Sor Juana spoke Nahuatl and she often experimented with composing Nahuatl ballads.²⁸ She also authored a play, *Loa Para el Auto sacramental de El divino Narciso*, which depicted indigenous people through song and allegory and utilized Nahuatl as well as Spanish.²⁹ Despite her unusual hobby of writing in Nahuatl, her reflection on the native people and their encounters with the Europeans were just that: reflections. She reflected on the "prevailing ethnographic reality" of New Spain, of the

²⁶ While social mobility in this period of England was rare, the most common mobility could be found in lower gentry moving into the upper class. What Margaret Cavendish did was not especially radical or revolutionary, however her own hand in her upwards mobility is important to note.

²⁷ Erika Mae Olbricht, "Using Sex: Margaret Cavendish's 'The Lady Contemplation' and the Authorial Fantasy of Class Permanence," *Pacific Coast Philology* 38 (2003): 78.

²⁸ Stavans, "Introduction," xxxii.

²⁹ Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, "Loa Para el Auto sacramental de El divino Narciso," in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 194-244.

mixing of indigenous and European culture, without challenging or pointing out any societal issues.³⁰

Although Sor Juana did not outwardly condemn the racial hierarchy of New Spain, she did advocate for the education and equal treatment of women. Though her motives have been questioned as being less about early feminist advocacy and more directly correlated to her personal desire to learn, she nevertheless commented extensively on female education.³¹ In *La Respuesta*, she writes about parents' reluctance to educate their daughters:

Oh, how much injury might have been avoided in our land if our aged women had been learned...Many prefer to leave their daughters unpolished and uncultured rather than to expose them to such notorious peril as that of familiarity with men, which quandary could be prevented if there were learned elder women, as Saint Paul wished to see, and if the teaching were handed down from one to another, as is the custom with domestic crafts and all other traditional skills.³²

On the other hand, Cavendish actively supported and accepted the common idea of the woman being the “weaker vessel” in relation to man.³³ She had no female intellectual companions and only engaged male philosophers in her writing. David Norbook suggests

³⁰ Natalie Underberg, “Sor Juana’s Villancios: Context, Gender, and Genre,” *Western Folklore* 60, no. 4 (2001): 308.

³¹ Rachel O’Donnell suggests that misunderstandings like these stem from a failure to recognize the subtlety of Sor Juana’s rhetoric and her intense irony employed throughout *La Respuesta* and her poetry; Rachael O’Donnell, “Gender, Culture, and Knowledge in New Spain: Sor Juana’s ‘To the Gentleman in Peru,’” *Women’s Studies* 44, no. 8 (2015): 1116.

³² de la Cruz, “La Respuesta,” 53-55.

³³ Antony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, & Submission in England 1500-1800*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 69.

that “Cavendish perhaps feared that aligning her particularly outspoken feminism with an active tradition of women intellectuals might alienate the masculine world of learning, whose approval she was anxious to gain.”³⁴ Margaret Cavendish’s plays demonstrate how as an author she does not truly challenge the status quo. Most notably, every play she wrote ends in at least one marriage.³⁵ Even when the story begins with a woman seeking independence and escape from men, like *The Convent of Pleasure*, the main character realizes the error of her ways and marries at the end. Within her philosophical writings, Cavendish steers clear of the woman question. Most often she only speaks of womanhood in relation to her own shortcomings. In one of her many epistles she writes, “It cannot be expected I should write so wisely or wittily as Men, being of the Effeminate sex.” Similarly, Sor Juana writes that she did not attempt to write of ecclesiastical topics because she found herself “incapable of their comprehension and unworthy of their employment.”³⁶ While these quotes could be seen as not only self-deprecating but also deprecating against the entire female sex, both women actually utilize their docility and self-abasement to authorize their own voice.

The authorization of these women to write is what made it possible for both Sor Juana and Margaret Cavendish to explore previously uncharted territory in the world of female writing. The world they sought to enter was almost entirely male; women did not enter this world. Instead, women in England and New Spain were first and foremost the embodiment of “private property for men;” when a woman is born she belongs to her

³⁴ Norbrook, “Women, the Republic of Letters,” 227.

³⁵ Olbricht, “Using Sex,” 79.

³⁶ de la Cruz, “La Respuesta,” 9.

father then later to her husband.³⁷ As private property, they were to remain within the private sphere of the home. In the case of Sor Juana, as she took her vows she metaphorically married God, subjecting her not only to the authority of God, but also to the entire (male) ecclesiastical hierarchy. The bishop and her confessor play the role of male protector in this relationship. Within the confines of marriage, a woman was expected to not seek any outward attention, keep herself separate from others, practice chastity except in the bed of her husband, and defer all decisions to the head of the household. In England in particular, the 17th century saw a great deal of misogyny, particularly with the circulation of literature preaching the inferiority of women. However, because of the misogyny found in pieces of literature like Joseph Swetnam's pamphlet, *The arraignment of lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women* (1615), the topic of women became more prominent. As proponents of female rights and education began to rise up in England, Europe, and the New World, those who were dissenting increased their polemic. Due to this societal expectation of women, Cavendish and Sor Juana had to receive authorization to step outside of their expected roles to write. This authorization was not only a tangible authorization given through those in positions of authority above the two women, but it can also be found in the form of rhetorical self-authorization like the self-abasement noted earlier.

Looking first at the authorization from outside sources, the first and most obvious comes from the authorization of the men who had power over Sor Juana and Margaret Cavendish. Father Núñez de Miranda was Sor Juana's confessor and had the most

³⁷ Susan Comilang, "Through the Closet: Private Devotion and the Shaping of Female Subjectivity in the Religious Recess," *Renaissance & Reformation/Renaissance et Reforme* 27, no. 3 (2003), 81.

immediate power over the nun. Within their 20-year relationship, the two – both highly intelligent polymaths – formed an intellectual rivalry that generated a “masculine anxiety on the part of Nunez de Miranda and frustration...on the part of Sor Juana.”³⁸ He took great issue with her poetry and other non-religious writings, as well as her fame in the Spanish Empire. In relation to this scandal, literary scholar Stephanie Kirk surmised that,

...In the seventeenth century, the woman who publically shared her thoughts through publication and dissemination of works of literature, instead of keeping them for her husband or, in the case of a nun, for God, was literally, not metaphorically, trafficking in her own sexuality.³⁹

While Sor Juana frequently claims that she was not the one who published her works and therefore not at fault, saying that she has never “written of [her] own will, but under the pleas and injunctions of others,” and that she never knew her works would be published, she still received copious amounts of blame and criticism.⁴⁰ Father Nunez and Sor Juana’s relationship ended when she dismissed him in 1681, however near the end of her life after her abjuration, she sought counsel from him again. Even the fact that she dismissed her confessor at all gave Sor Juana a certain amount of autonomy and authorization that would not have been available to a married woman. Due to their unsteady relationship and differences, the majority of Sor Juana’s writing was commissioned by the other religious authorities and the state.⁴¹ The Bishop of Puebla

³⁸ Stephanie Kirk, “Women’s Literacy and Masculine Authority: The Case of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Antonio Núñez de Miranda,” in *Women’s Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Rosilie Hernández, 139-157 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 142.

³⁹ Kirk, “Women’s Literacy,” 140.

⁴⁰ de la Cruz, “La Respuesta,” 65.

⁴¹ Julie A. Bokser, “Sor Juana’s Rhetoric of Silence,” *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 1 (2006): 5.

ordered her to write her commentary on Antonio Vieira's sermon and then, confusingly, published and circulated her work with an attached criticism. He asked her to stop writing, yet he simultaneously published her critique.⁴² He thereby presents a perplexing authorization and de-authorization in one document. This ambiguity was one major factor in Sor Juana's ultimate demise.

Margaret Cavendish's authorization from her husband was significantly more straightforward than the equivocal authorization of Sor Juana. One of the most common aspects of Cavendish's works is that most either contained contributions from her husband or epistles written by him attached to the beginning of the work. Within *The Convent of Pleasure*, there are multiple breaks where the phrase "Written by my Lord Duke" precedes a few lines of poetry.⁴³ All are embedded within the story for no apparent reason other than to add an air of legitimacy to her writing. By adding the lines written by her husband, Cavendish illustrated to her audience that she was under the intellectual wing of her superior; her male mentor. Within his epistles affixed to her other works, the Duke accomplishes multiple goals. He first, and foremost, defends his wife's authorship. Such was the complexity and intellect of her work that many of her contemporaries accused Cavendish of taking works written by her husband and simply putting her name on the cover. He not only defends his wife's right to her intellectual property, but he also regularly praises her intellect and writing skills. In his epistle to Philosophical and Physical Opinions he writes:

⁴² Bokser, "Sor Juana's Rhetoric," 9.

⁴³ Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure*. Edited by Mary Mark Ockerbloom. University of Pennsylvania Digital Library. Accessed February 3, 2018. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/newcastle/convent/convent.html#I>, Act IV, Scene I.

Were the old Grave Philosophers alive,
How they would envy you, and all would strive
Who first should burn their Books; since they so long
Thus have abus'd the world, and taught us wrong,
With hard words that mean nothing; which non-sense.
When we have Conn'd by heart, then we commence
Masters and Doctors, with grave looks; and then
Proud, because think, thus we are learned men,
And know not that we do know nothing right,
Like blinde men now, led onely by your sight.⁴⁴

This praise and the many others like it show her audience that she is not breaking her duties as wife, once again proving that she is under the guidance of her societal superior. For Margaret Cavendish, any honor she had was “her husband’s honor.”⁴⁵ Both the contributions to the story and his defense of her authorship serve to illustrate what literary scholar Valerie Billing describes as a “reciprocal creative relationship” between husband and wife.⁴⁶

While Cavendish received full support from her direct superior and Sor Juana received ambiguous criticism, the opposite is true of the two women and the support they received from others within their lives, particularly those in the court life. Sor Juana had

⁴⁴ William Cavendish, “TO THE LADY MARQVESSE OF NEVVCASTLE, On her Book intituled her Philosophicall, and Physicall Opinions,” in *The philosophical and physical opinions written by Her Excellency the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (Ann Arbor, MI and Oxford: Text Creation Partnership, 2003), n.p.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, “Gender, Sex, & Submission,” 152.

⁴⁶ Valerie Billing, “‘Treble Marriage:’ Margaret Cavendish, William Newcastle, and Collaborative Authorship,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 95.

two patronesses in her life time, both vicereines of New Spain with whom she shared an extremely close relationship, even after she entered the convent.⁴⁷ These ties that she had to the world outside the convent often protected her and gave her the authorization to write that she did not find within the church. While the church saw her writing as “audacious, blasphemous, and unbecoming a woman, let alone a cloistered nun,” the non-clerical population enjoyed it thoroughly and saw Sor Juana as the Tenth Muse. Their opinion is illustrated in a portrait of Sor Juana attached to the front of one of her books. Below the etching is this inscription in Latin, “Notice well the face of this virgin, for nowhere in the world will you find someone better in talent and piety.”⁴⁸ On the opposite end of the spectrum, Margaret Cavendish was typically seen by her contemporaries as a crazy and licentious flirt who possibly lied about the authorship of her own work. Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) wrote in his famous diary that Cavendish was “a conceited and ridiculous woman.”⁴⁹ The tension surrounding Cavendish and her ridiculousness rose from her breaking the cultural norm of the quiet and modest wife. Despite this criticism, Cavendish presented herself as a “dutiful wife and a publishing writer,” emphasizing the

⁴⁷ Sor Juana’s second and primary patroness was María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga or Lysi in Sor Juana’s poetry. The verses Sor Juana dedicates to her are often perceived by newer scholars as poems not of female friendship, but of erotic love. Older scholars, like premier Sor Juana specialist Octavio Paz, see these poems as simply the passions of a woman who loves words and is celebrating a friendship. Film and television adaptations of Sor Juana’s life typically explore the idea of Sor Juana having some form of erotic relationship with either Leonor or Lysi. Most prominent is the 1990 film *I, the Worst of All* and the 2016 Mexican television series, *Juana Ines*. For further reading into this topic, see: Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, “Sor Juana and the Search for (Queer) Cultural Heroes,” in *With Her Machete in Her Hand*, 66-90, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006); Octavio Paz and Diane Marting, “Juana Ramirez,” *Signs* 5, no. 1 (1979): 80-97.

⁴⁸ Ryan Prendergast, “Constructing an Icon: The Self-Referentiality and Framing of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2007), 41.

⁴⁹ Narain, “Notorious Celebrity,” 70

duality of her nature.⁵⁰ While alive, she received very little authorization from outside sources, aside from a few outliers like female scholar Bathsua Makin.⁵¹

Margaret Cavendish and Sor Juana both participated in a great deal of self-authorization. Though the self-authorization accomplished very little for either woman, their works are riddled with rhetorical devices intended to create a certain amount of agency and independence. Yet both Cavendish and Sor Juana end up negating their own forms of self-authorization by employing conflicting rhetorical methods. The first mode of self-authorization is through the women's respective use of fiction and poetry. Both Sor Juana and Cavendish write stories which present an alternative way of female life similar to the lives both women lead on their own. Sor Juana's literary self-authorization is significantly more polemical than that of Cavendish. Two of her poems in particular can be used as examples of literary self-authorization. First, "In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru," which defends female education and second, "A Philosophical Satire," where she demonstrates the contradicting standards of purity placed upon women by men. By arguing for women within the verses, Sor Juana is also arguing for her own plight and thereby giving herself the authority to write these opinions.

Cavendish was less of a proponent of feminism. In fact, her plays, particularly *The Convent of Pleasure*, initially seem like a product of societal expectations of women, encouraging them to be meek. *The Convent of Pleasure*, however, could be interpreted as an ironic commentary on the state of marriage and female freedom. The desire of the main character, Lady Happy, to live alone in her convent of women where they could

⁵⁰ Billing, "Treble Marriage," 95.

⁵¹ Narain, "Notorious Celebrity," 70.

spend every day discussing philosophy and beauty away from the “folly, vanity, and falsehood in men,” could reflect a self-insert into the story.⁵² Lady Happy is Margaret Cavendish. This theory is only further supported by the end of the story. The Prince forces Lady Happy to marry him and the once loquacious woman remains silent for the rest of the play.

The second method they use is what historian David Norbrook terms “strategic camouflage.”⁵³ Through their respective works the two women disguise their early feminist thoughts and beliefs by presenting themselves as being weaker than they truly were. They both utilize and exploit “stereotypes about women’s character and language” thereby engaging in a rhetoric of femininity, often in the form of self-deprecation.⁵⁴ In *Philosophical Letters* and *Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, Cavendish begins her works by addressing Cambridge University, who she sent copies of her book to. Within these letters, she calls her works “weak and infirm” and says that she does not expect “wise School-men...should value [her] book for any worth.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Sor Juana frequently reverts back to her position as an obedient woman and nun, writing that she has “never deemed [herself] as one who has any worth in letters or the wit necessity

⁵² Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure*, Act I, Scene II.

⁵³ Norbrook, “Women and the Republic of Letters,” 230.

⁵⁴ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990): 11.

⁵⁵ Margaret Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters or Modest reflections upon some opinions in natural philosophy maintained by several famous and learned authors of this age, expressed by way of letters* (Ann Arbor, MI and Oxford, UK: Text Creation Partnership, 2003), accessed February 3, 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A53058.0001.001>, n.p.; Margaret Cavendish, *The philosophical and physical opinions written by Her Excellency the Lady Marchionesse of Newcastle* (Ann Arbor, MI and Oxford, UK: Text Creation Partnership, 2003), accessed January 25, 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A53055.0001.001>, n.p.

demands of one who should write.”⁵⁶ By writing in a tone and style that was expected of a meek woman, they attempted to counteract any threats their intellect would present to their male academic counterparts.

The third and final way in which Sor Juana and Margaret Cavendish authorize their voice is through self-marketing. This runs conversely to the rhetoric of femininity both authors also employ throughout their works. While Cavendish may write one time that “she is so incapable of learning,” she writes another time that her “mind’s too big.”⁵⁷ Along with frequently praising her own intellect, she actively promoted her own fame. The infamy she garnered throughout England, though negative in many ways, still gave her an audience. She sought to make a statement and to be remembered. In an epistle to her famous work, *The Blazing World*, she said:

I am not Covetous, but as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be;
which is the cause, That though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the
Second; yet, I will endeavour to be, *Margaret* the *First*.⁵⁸

With her innovative writing, Cavendish essentially forced her contemporaries to recognize her.⁵⁹ She promotes herself and her wit in order to achieve fame, as she

⁵⁶ de la Cruz, “La Respuesta,” 11

⁵⁷ Cavendish, *Philosophical Letters*, unnumbered page; Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies written by the Right Honourable, the lady Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle* (Ann Arbor, MI and Oxford, UK: Text Creation Partnership, 2005), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A53061.0001.001>, unnumbered page.

⁵⁸ Margaret Cavendish, *The description of a new world, called the blazing-world written by the thrice noble, illustrious, and excellent princesse, the Duchess of Newcastle* (Ann Arbor, MI and Oxford, UK: Text Creation Partnership, 2003), accessed January 27, 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A53044.0001.001>, unnumbered page.

⁵⁹ Christine Mason Sutherland, “Aspiring Rhetorical Tradition: A Study of Margaret Cavendish,” in *Listening to their Voices: Essays on the Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women*, ed. Molly Meijer Wertheimer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991): 255.

confirmed in *Poems and Fancies* when she said, “For all I desire, is Fame...I wish my book would set a worke every tongue.”⁶⁰ Cavendish certainly received recognition, though often her fame resembled infamy as opposed to laudation and her critics simply deemed her “a whore [and] a mad woman.”⁶¹

Sor Juana’s instances of self-praise are found most frequently in *La Respuesta* though they are more understated than the examples from Cavendish. Within her response Sor Juana displays her intelligence through an autobiographical account in which she describes her natural inclination towards philosophy and learning and her own ability to do so “without benefit of a teacher.”⁶² By admitting that she immediately had a natural talent for reading and did not concern herself with the typical duties of a young woman, Sor Juana goes directly against the rhetoric of meek femininity which relies so heavily on stereotypical 17th century female roles. Sor Juana also goes so far as to, through heavy implication, compare herself to biblical men, specifically mirroring her own personal martyrdom to that of Christ⁶³ She takes the blame off of herself by saying that her own intellect is a gift from God that is simultaneously a curse. Through this, she states that she cannot resist letters because wisdom is her gift.⁶⁴ However, she returns to a rhetoric of femininity by saying she has never achieved wisdom, contradicting the pages she spent describing her own personal intelligence.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies*, unnumbered page.

⁶¹ qtd, Narain, “Notorious Celebrity,” 71.

⁶² de la Cruz, *La Respuesta*, 25.

⁶³ de la Cruz, *La Respuesta*, 33.

⁶⁴ de la Cruz, *La Respuesta*, 27.

⁶⁵ de la Cruz, *La Respuesta*, 39.

Within the rhetorical context of Sor Juana and Margaret Cavendish, contradictions like these represent the weak point of their attempts to authorize themselves in the context of the masculine academic world. Though the use of an authorization embedded within their prose and poetry creates a space in which the fictional women can be intelligent and independent, it did not serve to authorize the authors themselves, only their characters. The strategic camouflage utilized by both women would have served either women greatly if not for the opposing stance of their self-promotion. The ultimate failure of both women to avoid censure and ridicule can be directly related to the fact that no matter the mode or method of authorization, neither woman could escape the context of 17th century gender relations without giving up the strength present within their writing. To write philosophy at all was to impose upon a subject of writing reserved for men. Both women's rhetorical self-authorization shows two futile attempts to bypass the criticism and persecution from their male counterparts. However, after they died, their brilliance would be appreciated by the world at large for centuries to come. To this day, neither woman is remembered as "the worst of all."

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