

Resource:

## *A Nun Challenges the Patriarchy*



**Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**

Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas, *Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ca. 1750. Oil on canvas. Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City.

## Document Text

You foolish men who lay  
the guilt on women,  
not seeing you're the cause  
of the very thing you blame;

if you invite their disdain  
with measureless desire  
why wish they well behave  
if you incite to ill.

You fight their stubbornness,  
then, weightily,  
you say it was their lightness  
when it was your guile.

In all your crazy shows  
you act just like a child  
who plays the bogeyman  
of which he's then afraid.

With foolish arrogance  
you hope to find a Thais  
in her you court, but a Lucretia  
when you've possessed her.

What kind of mind is odder  
than his who mists

a mirror and then complains  
that it's not clear.

Their favor and disdain  
you hold in equal state,  
if they mistreat, you complain,  
you mock if they treat you well.

No woman wins esteem of you:  
the most modest is ungrateful  
if she refuses to admit you;  
yet if she does, she's loose.

You always are so foolish  
your censure is unfair;  
one you blame for cruelty  
the other for being easy.

What must be her temper  
who offends when she's  
ungrateful and wearies  
when compliant?

But with the anger and the grief  
that your pleasure tells  
good luck to her who doesn't love you  
and you go on and complain.

Your lover's moans give wings  
to women's liberty:

and having made them bad,  
you want to find them good.

Who has embraced  
the greater blame in passion?  
She who, solicited, falls,  
or he who, fallen, pleads?

Who is more to blame,  
though either should do wrong?  
She who sins for pay  
or he who pays to sin?

Why be outraged at the guilt  
that is of your own doing?  
Have them as you make them  
or make them what you will.

Leave off your wooing  
and then, with greater cause,  
you can blame the passion  
of her who comes to court?

Patent is your arrogance  
that fights with many weapons  
since in promise and insistence  
you join world, flesh, and devil.

**Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *You Foolish Men*. Trans. Michael Smith. Courtesy  
of Poetry.org.**

## Background

Juana Inés de la Cruz was born in a small town near Mexico City on November 12, 1651. She could read and write in Latin and Spanish when she was only three years old, and she was composing classical poetry by age eight. By the time she was 13, Juana was a master of Greek logic and philosophy, and was teaching Latin to other children in her community. She also taught herself to read and write Nahuatl, the language spoken by the native people of Mexico.

As a teenager and young adult, Juana lived in the viceroy's court in Mexico City, where her talents impressed many of the colony's elite. During this time, she turned down numerous marriage proposals because she preferred to continue her studies. In 1669, she became a nun so she could escape marriage and continue to study as she wished.

Over the next twenty-five years, Sor Juana became famous for her poetry and prose on topics like love, religion, feminism, and women's rights. Ultimately, her work drew criticism from the religious authorities, who were appalled that a nun, who was supposed to live her life apart from the world, shared her opinions so freely. In 1694, she gave up writing, sold her books for charity, and retired to a life of caring for sick sisters in her convent.

## About the Document

In this poem, Juana highlights the double standard that women lived with in New Spain, and lays the blame for women's fault squarely at the feet of men. It is a fascinating peek into the social pressures that Juana and her peers faced in the social structure of Mexico City, as well as a scathing criticism of Spanish colonial patriarchy.

## Vocabulary

- **censure:** Express extreme disapproval.
- **convent:** The home of a community of nuns.
- **esteem:** Respect.
- **guile:** Sly intelligence.
- **incite:** Encourage.
- **Lucretia:** A Roman noblewoman who committed suicide after she was raped to preserve her family's honor.
- **Nahuatl:** The language spoken by the Native people of Mexico.
- **nun:** A woman who takes vows to dedicate her life to the service of the Catholic church.
- **patent:** Obvious.
- **patriarchy:** A system of society or government in which men hold power and women are excluded.
- **solicit:** Ask for something.
- **Thais:** A sex worker who accompanied Alexander the Great on many of his campaigns.
- **viceroys:** The king or queen's representative in the Spanish colonies.

## Discussion Questions

- Why does Sor Juana characterize men as foolish?
- What does this poem reveal about the gender dynamic in colonial Mexico?
- Why did Sor Juana give up writing? What does her life reveal about the lives of women in colonial Mexico?

## Suggested Activities

- Sor Juana wrote this poem to draw attention to the hypocrisy of gender relations in her society. Ask students to follow in her footsteps by writing a poem that addresses the state of gender relations in modern America.
- Compare Sor Juana's poetry with the work of Anne Bradstreet. What do these poems reveal about the lives of women in different corners of colonial North America? How were their experiences shaped by their gender and their religious beliefs?
- Combine this document with the life story of Doña Teresa de Aguilera y Roche to see how the hypocrisy that Sor Juana highlights shaped the experiences of Doña Teresa.
- Compare and contrast the lives of Sor Juana and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha. What drew these women to a religious vocation? What did they gain from their choice? What did they lose? You can use this comparison as a starting point for a larger research project on the lives of nuns in the colonial Americas.
- Invite students to read and analyze more of Sor Juana's work, available online.
- Sor Juana was one of many women in Europe and the Americas who made important contributions to the Enlightenment. Combine her story with the resources below for a lesson about women and the Enlightenment in the New World: Sybilla Masters, inventor from Pennsylvania, Anne Bradstreet, poet from Massachusetts, and Maria Sybilla Merian, scientist in Surinam.
- Did the hypocrisy Sor Juana critiques exist in other colonial cultures? Invite your students to answer this question by reading and analyzing the life story of Dennis and Hannah Holland through the lens of this poem.

## Themes

### DOMESTICITY AND FAMILY

## **New-York Historical Society Curriculum Library Connections**

- For more resources relating to the Spanish colonies of the Americas, see *Nueva York: 1613-1945*.