

SOR JUANA AND HER WORLD

Nina M. Scott

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

UNTOLD SISTERS: HISPANIC NUNS IN THEIR OWN WORKS. By Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf. Translations by Amanda Powell. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989. Pp. 450. \$39.95 cloth, \$20.95 paper.)

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ. Edited by Stephanie Merrim. (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1991. Pp. 189. \$21.95.)

JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ AND THE THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: THE FIRST MEXICAN THEOLOGY. By George H. Tavard. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. Pp. 239. \$29.95.)

SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ: AMOR, POESIA, SOLEDUMBRE. By Victoria Urbano. Edited and introduced by Adelaida López de Martínez. (Potomac, Md.: Scripta Humanistica, 1990. Pp. 227. \$43.50.)

YO, LA PEOR DE TODAS. Film directed by María Luisa Bemberg. (Argentina, GEA Cinematográfica, 1990. Spanish, color, 110 minutes.)

During the past few years, scholarship on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695) has burgeoned, and there will likely be more to come with the three-hundredth anniversary of her death occurring in 1995. Interest in Sor Juana has been sparked by two main factors: the explosion of scholarship in colonial Latin American studies and the continuing impetus of feminist-oriented studies in women's literature. In the charged field of gender politics, Sor Juana has become an icon. Octavio Paz's 1982 biography did much to focus attention on her, as well as unleashing some predictable polemics.¹ As was the case with Frederick Jackson Turner in his day, one can agree with Paz or refute him, but one cannot ignore him. Another contributing factor is that Sor Juana's works have now become more accessible in English translation.² This review essay will examine

1. Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o las trampas de la fe* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1982). It was subsequently translated by Margaret Sayers Peden and published in English as *Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

2. Alan S. Trueblood, *A Sor Juana Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Margaret Sayers Peden, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Poems, a Bilingual Anthology* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1985); Peden, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Salisbury, Conn.: Lime Rock, 1982); Luis

four recent books on Sor Juana and her world and a feature-length color film.

Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau's *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* brings together examples of nuns' writing from Spain and Spanish America. Such writing includes autobiographies, religious plays, letters, descriptions of mystical experiences, prayers, chronicles of the founding of convents, and the like. Although some of these texts were published previously, most were not readily available. Others are appearing in print for the first time.

Untold Sisters does not deal with Sor Juana per se but provides a context for her writing that enables scholars to judge her work more accurately. As Arenal and Schlau note, "She has been treated as an isolated exception as a writer. . . . Yet hundreds of nuns wrote, and her similarities to other authors of the convent may have been hidden through their losses, suppressions and silences" (p. 341). Building on the work of pioneer researchers of female conventual life in Spanish America such as Josefina Muriel, Asunción Lavrin, and Ann Miriam Gallagher, Arenal and Schlau have assembled a bilingual compendium of texts that offers a whole new look at this corpus of writing. Amanda Powell is to be congratulated for her excellent translations that make these texts accessible to English-speaking readers.

Untold Sisters consists of an introduction, six well-annotated chapters, a conclusion, a selected bibliography, a useful index, and a number of good illustrations. The reasonable price of the paperback edition also recommends it for classroom use. The introductory chapter presents a wealth of information with clarity. Topics include women in monasticism, the influence of Santa Teresa de Avila's autobiography, mysticism and erotic language, and the overall nature of nuns' writings. Arenal and Schlau call attention to two essential facts: these texts are numerous, and they "contain almost the only record we have of the consciousness of early modern women in Hispanic lands" (p. 2).³

Writing by nuns is still not easily accessible to modern readers for several reasons. First of all, the religious setting and its language are often unfamiliar to our more secular age. Furthermore, because nuns had little access to formal education, they were prone to oblique ways of expressing themselves and often did not organize their narratives as clearly as male

Harss, *Sor Juana's Dream* (New York: Lumen Books, 1986); and Nina M. Scott, "If you are not pleased to favor me, put me out of your mind . . .": Gender and Authority in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and the Translation of Her Letter to the Reverend Father Maestro Antonio Núñez of the Society of Jesus," *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, no. 5 (1988):429-38.

3. Asunción Lavrin is about to publish a new study with a valuable bibliography on this subject. See "La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial," forthcoming in *Colonial Latin American Review*. See also Kathryn Joy McKnight, "Voz, subjetividad y mística en la Madre Castillo: tres elementos de una escritura femenina conventual," *Texto y contexto* 17 (Sept.-Dec. 1991):66-97.

writers did. Nuns wrote their autobiographies usually not because they wanted to but because their confessors had ordered them to do so, and for many nuns, writing was a painful, psychologically conflictive activity. They were inhibited by their lack of education but also by the fear that what they put down on paper might cause trouble for them with the Inquisition. Moreover, the act of writing about themselves ran counter to all the Catholic Church had previously demanded of them. As Asunción Lavrin explains, nuns were routinely told that “the struggle for perfection was one of the purposes of religious life. Physical and spiritual discipline, prayer, meditation, self-effacement, and the constant restraining of human desires were some of the means to achieve perfection within the religious state” (see her essay in the Merrim collection, p. 69). To have been directed for years to bury one’s will and then be ordered to write one’s autobiography, that most self-affirming form of writing—it is no wonder that many nuns experienced psychological turmoil when they took up the pen. Others, however, were less daunted, and *Untold Sisters* successfully conveys a wide range of nuns’ personalities.

The first four chapters focus on Spanish nuns, while Chapters 5 and 6 deal with nuns in the two viceregal centers of Peru and Mexico. Chapter 5 examines the relationship between Mother Antonia Lucía del Espíritu Santo, a resourceful and politically adept woman who was determined to found a new order, and Mother Josefa de la Providencia, her friend, disciple, and biographer. As Arenal and Schlauf point out, the closeness of the two nuns’ friendship and cooperation is reflected in their continual use of the pronoun *nosotras*, which “asserted a female communal voice, thus protecting themselves from male secular and ecclesiastic authority” (p. 310). Although Mother Josefa was very aware of the Inquisition, she was also determined to portray her friend’s saintly character. She managed to negotiate these treacherous waters by keeping a skilled hand on her narrative tiller, charting a course found in the work of many nuns: “Under her surface submission, innocence, blandness, and confusion, [Mother Josefa] moves through the text demonstrating enormous control, cleverness, strength of character, and clarity of vision” (p. 312).

Chapter 6 focuses on six nuns in Mexico, where so many women opted to take the veil that by the end of the seventeenth century, Mexico City alone had twenty-two convents.⁴ In Mexico as well as Peru, admission to convents reflected social stratification, hence no organized religious communities existed for Indian or mestiza women in Mexico until the early eighteenth century.⁵ In this chapter, Arenal and Schlauf present six notably different nuns: musically gifted women, several with mystic

4. Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o las trampas de la fe*, p. 165.

5. Ann Miriam Gallagher, R.S.M., “The Indian Nuns of Mexico City’s *Monasterio of Corpus Christi, 1724–1821*,” in *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives*, edited by Asunción Lavrin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978), 153.

tendencies, one who was chronically ill (and was beaten severely by the nuns in her convent because they thought she was faking), an Indian *cacica*, and a wealthy young woman of good family whose writing is not one bit humble or self-effacing. Unfortunately, this chapter is problematic in its interior organization, requiring the reader to constantly flip pages back and forth in order to align biographies with writings. If *Untold Sisters* goes into a second edition, it might be wise to reorganize this chapter.

Arenal and Schlau's conclusion reiterates the peculiar nature of the status of women religious in the colonial era: "By entering the convent, nuns evaded the gendered structure of society. They were the only group of females who did not belong to anybody but God, and they were dedicated to the soul, which was said to be genderless" (p. 411). Arenal and Schlau close with the hope that other researchers will do further work in this area, a wish that is already being fulfilled by scholars like Jean Franco, Kathleen Myers, Kathryn McKnight, and Angela Robledo.

Stephanie Merrim's *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* is a carefully organized text that brings together fundamental scholarship on Sor Juana, some of it previously published but difficult to obtain and other essays written especially for this collection. The book contains eight chapters by seven contributors, a chronology of Sor Juana's life and works, and an annotated list of critical sources. Merrim's preface pinpoints the fundamental question under examination in this volume: "What did it mean for Sor Juana to be a woman writer and a woman writing?" The preface also explains the approach used to assemble the collection: "We examine, from differing woman-centered spaces, the personal and intellectual climate in which Sor Juana lived and wrote, as well as each of the genres in which she employed her literary talents" (p. 7).

Merrim's introductory study examines recent criticism of Sor Juana's works, including that of Paz, who in Merrim's opinion "looks at Sor Juana . . . as a woman, but not as a woman writer" (p. 20). Merrim then delineates strategies for truly feminist readings of Sor Juana's works: an analysis of her language, her relation to extant literary traditions (both male and female), specific treatment of literary characters of both genders, and Sor Juana's own "uneasy attitude toward creativity, writing, fame, knowledge" (p. 29).

The next essay was written by Dorothy Schons, the pioneer of U.S. researchers on Sor Juana who published in-depth studies of her life and work in the 1920s. Originally published in 1926, "Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana" makes an excellent introductory chapter to *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana*. Schons zeroes in on the two fundamental questions that all *sorjuanistas* must face: why did the beautiful and talented Juana choose the convent in the first place, and why did she stop writing at the height of her fame, two years before her death? In Schons's opinion,

Sor Juana chose the one place that afforded the possibility of continuing her intellectual life, an answer with which most critics concur. The thornier issue is raised by the second question, which has caused scholars to diverge in their opinions, often vehemently, because this is where gender politics enters in. Merrim's view is that Sor Juana was silenced by the patriarchal structures within the church (p. 30), a position also taken by Schons. The Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, was relentless in pursuing a nun who in his view was far too much in the public eye. According to Merrim, that pursuit—combined with natural disasters like famine, plague, and the death of her great protector, the Marquis de la Laguna—caused Sor Juana to give up “the unequal struggle” (p. 57). But whereas Merrim perceives Sor Juana as a martyr (p. 30), Schons has claimed that she “died in the odor of sanctity, revered and loved by all” (p. 57). Whether Sor Juana should be viewed as martyr or saint is an issue that divides her critics down the middle.

Asunción Lavrin's essay in *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana*, “Unlike Sor Juana: The Model Nun in the Religious Literature of Colonial Mexico,” is an excellent source of information on the context of nuns' lives in colonial Spanish America. She has conducted extended research in conventual archives in Mexico, using primary sources to reconstruct the world of the female religious. Lavrin cites a number of fascinating case studies of nuns. She points out what kind of behavior most nuns tried to emulate and how Sor Juana deviated from this ideal: she was neither self-effacing nor retiring from the world; she had more education than most women (and men) of her time; she was not drawn to mysticism, had no particular religious vocation, and openly confessed that many aspects of convent life were a trial to her. In addressing the question of why Sor Juana fell silent, Lavrin hypothesizes that around the crucial year of 1693, Sor Juana experienced “a religious crisis that no biographer has managed adequately to explain,” one that caused her to renounce her previous way of life and become more like a model nun (p. 79). Be that as it may, the nun who is remembered is the genius, not the prototype of the ideal.

The essay “Tricks of the Weak” by Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer has been widely praised for the brilliance and persuasiveness of its approach. Using Sor Juana's “Reply to Sister Philotea” as her basis, Ludmer examines a matrix of three intersecting premises at the heart of Sor Juana's discourse: “two verbs and the negative: *saber* (to know), *decir* (to speak or say), and *no*.” By shifting these elements around in a variety of combinations, Sor Juana demonstrated to Ludmer that “To know and to say or speak . . . constitute opposing fields for a woman: whenever the two coexist, they occasion resistance and punishment” (p. 87). Ludmer shows the interrelationship between the “Reply” and the metaphysical poem “First Dream”: both open with the theme of muteness and silence, and the “Dream” ends in silence as well: “at the peak of understanding—

perplexity, silence" (p. 88). Other leitmotifs noted are speaking from a position of weakness and marginality to one's superiors and the danger of speaking in public, "a space occupied by authority and violence" (p. 90). When Ludmer wrote this analysis in 1982, she was still suffering the effects of Argentina's "dirty war" on intellectuals like herself, which would explain the special relevance of Sor Juana's gambits to her own situation: "[H]er trick: not to say but to know, or saying that one doesn't know but knowing, or saying the opposite of what one knows. This trick . . . combines, as in all tactics of resistance, submission to and acceptance of the place assigned to one by the [more powerful] other, with antagonism and confrontation, retreat from collaboration" (p. 91).

The following essay is Merrim's study of the "womanscript" in Sor Juana's theatre, both secular and religious. Merrim presents some surprising conclusions. In her view, Sor Juana essentially wrote the same play over and over again, one that "enacts the drama of the divided woman, the dark versus the light heroine. Hardly subversive, indeed almost self-punishing, the script militates against the former, who displays the attributes of the woman writer" (p. 95). Yet in Sor Juana's plays, the creative woman dominates the stage even though she is often punished and rendered silent at the end. This common theme of internal division reflects Sor Juana's own divided self (a point also made by Lavrin), as does the sad tone of her dramatic works, "the melancholy of a woman who 'soared above the rest' but never fully forgave herself for her own daring" (p. 119).

Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabàt-Rivers both analyze Sor Juana's "First Dream," which describes the soul-intellect in its yearning to comprehend the nature of the cosmos. Leaving the sleeping body behind, the soul twice soars heavenward in its daring quest, only to fail both times, the last time when dawn approaches and the soul is forced to descend and rejoin the body. Many critics have noted the last lines of the poem, especially the final adjective, which calls attention to the female voice behind the poem: "quedando a luz más cierta / el Mundo iluminado, y yo despierta." Arenal perceives in the "First Dream" and its narrative strategies a prefiguring of contemporary feminist theories. Sabàt-Rivers notes Sor Juana's presentation of "intellectual concerns that are not limited to women but belong to the human race in general" (p. 145), as well as the preponderance of feminine nouns and characters in the poem.

Ester Gimbernat de González looks at yet another variation of the female narrative voice in Sor Juana's poetry. Examining three love sonnets closely, Gimbernat points out how the nun began with an ancient poetic tradition, in which a male poet speaks through female characters, but radically changes the dynamic by reminding the reader that in these poems it is she who controls male discourse: "The poet's knowledge rules the lover's voice" (p. 174).

George Tavad, who taught at Methodist Theological School in Ohio and has written eight books on religious subjects, brings a different focus to Sor Juana studies: that of the professional theologian. In *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, he too points out the difficulty faced by modern readers in dealing with Sor Juana's work, especially its references to Egyptology, Graeco-Roman mythology, and Biblical scripture: "[W]hat was grasped as an enlightening imagery in the cultured classes of her time is likely to strike the modern mind as a conundrum that requires recourse to specialized dictionaries. A certain amount of arduous spade work is thus necessary before one can truly appreciate Sor Juana's poetry [and prose]" (p. 9). As one familiar with this context, Tavad can guide the uninitiated reader.

Tavad divides Sor Juana's religious works into eight categories, which he treats thematically rather than according to literary genre. Topics discussed include her concept of the world and of the soul, which saints were important to her, her concepts of the nature of Christ and the Virgin Mary, the "finesses" of God (His most delicate acts of love), Sor Juana's silence, and her theology of beauty. Tavad explains which of these concepts were particularly important during the Counter-Reformation and expertly defines the monastic and theological terminology. Like Ludmer, Tavad identifies silence as a leitmotif, but he interprets Sor Juana's ultimate muteness very differently. In discussing the nun's theology, Tavad stresses the important link between silence and beauty: "Silence is an attribute of God, pregnant with glory . . . , [and] Juana entered into it in homage to the beauty and the glory of God, in which all her life had bathed" (p. 207). Tavad is sensitive to Sor Juana's skill with words but finds that when she attempted to speak of God, she was faced with the failing of human language and fell mute: "There is an unbridgeable gap between Juana's vision and the means of its depiction. The medieval Scholastics were [already] aware of the discrepancy between words and meaning" (p. 213).

Tavad agrees that Sor Juana underwent a profound change around 1693 but tends to gloss over the persecution she endured at the hands of the overtly misogynistic Archbishop of Mexico (p. 168). Like Lavrin, Tavad believes that Sor Juana fell silent because when she reached this stage in her life, she turned more toward God. When Sor Juana realized that "the tongue is not enough; words no longer suffice; there is too much wealth for speech," she abruptly renounced language and lapsed into silence (p. 182). Unlike most of the other critics under discussion here, Tavad considers her ultimate silence as a positive development: "One can also unite silence and expression, making silence the form and figure, and admiration the content and the inner fullness: this, as far as we know, was Juana's final way" (p. 217). Although I honor the inner logic of Tavad's position, I must admit to some problems in accepting this perspective.

Technical aspects of Tavard's study also trouble me, starting with some factual errors in the introduction. He states that Sor Juana's mother had three sons and three daughters, when in fact she had five daughters and one son. Tavard also maintains that in 1650 there was a convent of Poor Clares for Indian women, when the first convent for aristocratic indigenous women was not founded until 1724.⁶ I also find it odd that Tavard used the one-volume edition of Sor Juana's works (edited by Francisco Monterde) rather than the more scholarly four-volume edition by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte and Alberto Salceda. Tavard's citations are inconsistent about providing both the Spanish and the English texts of Sor Juana's works, and some of his translations are frankly awkward.⁷ Typographic errors are evident, and more attention should have been paid to accent marks. Tavard claims that he could not lay hands on the original of Sor Juana's 1681–82 letter to her confessor (p. 219, n. 5), yet it appeared in the third edition of Paz's book (1983).⁸ But enough nit-picking—Tavard brings a theological expertise to Sor Juana scholarship that not many critics can match, and his appreciation of her genius is sincere.

Victoria Urbano's *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: amor, poesía, soledumbre* was actually brought out by her good friend Adelaida López de Martínez after Urbano died in 1984, leaving the manuscript unfinished. This background makes one sorry not to be able to write a totally positive review, but I find problems with this book. For one, Urbano's approach to Sor Juana is scholarly up to a point, but then emotion takes over and academic distance is lost. Basing her analysis principally on Sor Juana's love poetry, Urbano reconstructs what López de Martínez's terms "la autobiografía latente en la obra de Sor Juana" (p. xi). Herein lies the book's other main problem: there is something inherently risky in interpreting poetry as *testimonio*, especially in the case of Sor Juana, where it is exceedingly difficult to date many of her poems.

Urbano's study is divided into three parts corresponding to three moments in Sor Juana's biography: her early years as lady-in-waiting at the viceregal court and her decision to take the veil (roughly 1665 to 1673); the apogee of her creative talents under the protection of her viceregal friends, the Marquis de la Laguna and his wife María Luisa, the Countess of Paredes (1680–1688); and an analysis of the "First Dream" as a key to the last years of Sor Juana's life (1688–1695). Urbano tackles an issue that many critics have tiptoed around: the possible homosexual attraction

6. See Gallagher, "Indian Nuns," 153; and Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 355.

7. For example, Tavard renders the following verses of Sor Juana's famous sonnet "En perseguirme, Mundo" thus: "Y no estimo hermosura que, vencida / es despojo civil de las edades," as "I do not value beauty that, vanquished, / has been left politely by the years" (p. 172).

8. Failing that he could have contacted me, since he used my translation of this letter in his work.

between Sor Juana and her two viceregal benefactresses. Many scholars have noted the passionate tone of the nun's verses to the Countess of Paredes, but Urbano asserts that it was Sor Juana's love for Leonor Carreto, the vicereine who first installed her at court, that dominated Sor Juana's life. Urbano's method is admittedly shaky. For example, she states unequivocally that the *romance* "Ya que para despedirme /—dulce idolatrado dueño—" was written on Leonor Carreto's departure from Mexico: "lo sensacional es su contenido anímico, por ser la más abierta confesión de amor que ha estado encerrada en el misterio por tres siglos, y que hoy me toca a mí la suerte de descifrar. . . . No puede haber dudas respecto a la reciprocidad de ese amor entre sor Juana y Leonor de Carreto" (p. 69).⁹ Urbano is on surer ground regarding the relationship between Sor Juana and the Countess of Paredes. Quite apart from personal feelings, the friendship of a woman of such high social position gave the nun a degree of creative freedom she never experienced before or after. Critics differ as to whether Sor Juana's poems to the Countess indicate an erotic relationship, but Urbano entertains no doubts: "Si bien es cierto que tales efusiones de gratitud eran frecuentes, no podemos, sin embargo, confundirlas con los auténticos sentimientos amorosos que expresó sor Juana en sus poemas" (p. 120).

Urbano differs with Tavard over the mystery of Sor Juana's ultimate silence. Urbano feels that the nun's quest for knowledge was her way of drawing closer to God (p. 201) and that despite her ultimate silence, she never renounced this pursuit. Tavard insists that the nun's decision to fall silent was an abrupt one, but Urbano's earlier study maintains categorically that such a radical change in one year's time was impossible (p. 208). Judging the nun's silence as the gag forced on her by the church, Urbano concurs with Merrim's view that Sor Juana was not a saint but a martyr (p. 212).

Unfortunately, Urbano's study exhibits many errors in orthography, punctuation, and bibliographical references. She did not use the Méndez Plancarte edition and frequently cites works without giving their titles or excerpts material without providing any source at all (as on p. 146). These errata may have resulted from Urbano's not having lived to review the final manuscript.

Last on the list of works under consideration is María Luisa Bemberg's recent film on Sor Juana, *Yo, la peor de todas*. One of Argentina's principal filmmakers, Bemberg is known best for *Camila* (1984), which attracted worldwide attention. John King observed rightly that Bemberg "has used the advantages of her upper-class background productively, to

9. Méndez Plancarte lists this *romance* as being "sin fechas conjeturables." See *Obras completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, vol. 1, *Lírica personal*, edited by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1976; first published in 1951), 1:5.

question in art the hegemonic values of the Argentine aristocracy, in particular the rigid patriarchal codes that suppress any act of rebellion."¹⁰ Most of her films deal with women who transgress the established order and authority—and who pay the price. Filmed shortly after the demise of the Argentine generals, *Camila* was an obvious political commentary on Argentina's military dictatorship and the terrors of the "dirty war" despite the film's historical setting in the nineteenth-century regime of dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. Given the repressive political climate in Argentina at the beginning of the 1980s, it does not surprise me that both Ludmer and Bemberg should have chosen Sor Juana as the focus of their works.

I happened to be in Argentina as a Senior Fulbright lecturer in June and July of 1987, just when Bemberg was beginning to work on this project. On hearing of my expertise, she contacted me and gave me the script to read, in English and in Spanish. The script had been written by Bemberg and Antonio Larreta, and I was struck by its intelligence and sensitivity. The reason for the two versions of the script was that Bemberg was unsure whether she would be filming in the United States or in Latin America. Such uncertainty reflected a reality of Latin American filmmaking noted by King: "Increasingly the only way to guarantee the financial viability of a project is to enter into co-production arrangements with other countries, which often means attracting foreign stars."¹¹ Thanks to French financial backing, Bemberg was able to shoot the entire film in Argentina, in an abandoned film studio on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, converted by a Polish set designer into Sor Juana's Hieronymite convent. Because nuns lived out their lives in perpetual enclosure, this set worked to perfection.

Bemberg is a stickler for the historical accuracy of details, an impressive feature of her film. For example, when Bemberg wanted to convey the laxness of Sor Juana's Hieronymite order, she created a scene in which the nun is preparing to receive callers. Bemberg filmed Sor Juana primping in her cell, putting on scent, and fastening a bracelet on her wrist before descending to the locutory (the reception room for visitors). Having just researched the iconography of nuns in New Spain, I found out that this depiction was absolutely true to reality: bracelets were common accessories to the opulent habits worn by Mexican nuns in the late seventeenth century.

The title of the film, *Yo, la peor de todas*, comes from the last documents known to have been written by Sor Juana: the reaffirmations of her vows and beliefs as she humbled herself before the church, some of them

10. John King, "Assailing the Heights of Macho Pictures: Women Film-Makers in Contemporary Argentina," in *Knives and Angels: Women Writers in Latin America*, edited by Susan Bassnett (London: Zed, 1990), 161.

11. *Ibid.*, 160.

signed in her own blood. Her actual phrase was “Yo, la peor del mundo,” but that is a minor point. The film is supposedly based on Octavio Paz’s biography but does not always follow it.

Although the film contains some flashbacks to earlier periods of Sor Juana’s life, Bemberg focuses mainly on the fifteen years before her death in 1695. Sor Juana’s great friends, the viceroys, and her great adversary, the Archbishop of Mexico, all arrived in the same year (1680), and thus Bemberg establishes from the opening frames a power struggle between state and church in which Sor Juana became deeply enmeshed.

The film begins by showing Sor Juana surrounded by her books and scientific instruments, delighting in writing courtly verse and drama, and savoring her sessions with Mexican intellectuals in the convent’s locutory. Bemberg’s portrayal of convent life will open the eyes of many viewers for whom the realities of such an existence are almost incomprehensible: the camaraderie, the envy, the spying, the discipline of the flesh, the political maneuvering among the sisters, the ultimate power of male superiors. The scenes shot in the locutory are especially effective, with Sor Juana perennially behind the heavy, square bars separating her from the rest of the world.

Bemberg, like Urbano (but unlike Paz), underscores erotic elements in the relationship between Sor Juana and María Luisa. This aspect is handled delicately but forthrightly. María Luisa is played by the French actress Dominique Sanda, whose type corresponds to extant descriptions of the blonde, blue-eyed vicereine. Assumpta Serna, a Spanish actress previously seen in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Matador*, possesses the mixture of intelligence and beauty that makes her a perfect Sor Juana. Whereas Paz maintained that the passion of Sor Juana’s verses to María Luisa was strictly poetic convention,¹² Bemberg’s film portrays a definite physical attraction. The one who initiates this aspect of their relationship in the film is María Luisa. As vicereine she can enter the nun’s cell at will, and hence the two women enjoy great privacy. In one scene, when the two women are about to part, María Luisa orders Sor Juana to take off her veil so that she may see the nun’s hair. As layer after layer of cloth are unwound from her head, the effect is very sensual, and María Luisa responds by kissing Sor Juana on the mouth. A real-life token of the vicereine’s affection was that she took Sor Juana’s poetry with her when she left Mexico and ultimately had it published in Spain. The following scene in the film shows a book burning, with Bemberg insinuating (accurately in my opinion) that had it not been for María Luisa, Sor Juana’s works might never have survived.

Bemberg’s portrayal of the three male clerics who played major roles in Sor Juana’s life is handled well. Outsiders unfamiliar with the

12. Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o las trampas de la fe*, 370–71.

labyrinthine ecclesiastical politics of viceregal Mexico will often find it difficult to distinguish between these men. Bemberg helps by color-coding them: the Archbishop wears red or black, the Bishop of Puebla red and white, and Sor Juana's confessor Núñez blue. In one scene, again in the locutory, all three appear together: they, shoulder to shoulder on one side of the grille; she, alone on the other—a powerful visual statement of the gender inequalities inherent in the Catholic Church.¹³

Bemberg handles the crucial issue of Sor Juana's ultimate silence adeptly. Despite the limitation of shooting the entire film within the convent interiors, outside factors that wore down Sor Juana's resistance filter through to the viewer. As soon as the viceroys leave and her position of power is curtailed, fewer visitors come to the locutory. After Sor Juana loses her temper with the Archbishop, her confessor Núñez abandons her. Rain falls incessantly outside the windows of the convent, and the plague arrives. Wrenching scenes of dying nuns reveal the ones left alive flagellating themselves to appease God's wrath. Sor Juana silently nurses the sick and scrubs the convent floors. Seeing her on her knees at this task, Núñez praises her humility and offers to take her back, but only after a full confession. Bemberg's camera angle speaks volumes: Núñez is usually viewed obliquely from below. The price for reconciliation with confessor and church is divestment of all of her possessions: books, papers, and scientific instruments as well as María Luisa's miniature and the Aztec crown of iridescent Quetzal feathers, tokens of love that the vicereine had given her. At the end, a silent Sor Juana huddles in the window recess of her cell, which is completely bare except for a crucifix. As Bemberg once observed about her earlier film *Miss Mary* (1986), *Yo, la peor de todas* is also "a film about a great emptiness."¹⁴

The four books and one film under consideration here are evidence of Sor Juana's continuing hold on the imaginations and the emotions of many. There is much good scholarship here to enlighten those interested in her life and work, especially on the question of why she ceased to write at the end of her life. There have always been two schools of thought on this matter: those who believe that Sor Juana underwent a true conversion experience and rejected her previous life as folly, and those who feel that the church proved to be too powerful an adversary and ultimately succeeded in extinguishing her will and her voice. Which interpretation is the right one? Barring the discovery of new information on Sor Juana's life, we will probably never know.

13. Bemberg chose to cast the Bishop of Puebla as one of Sor Juana's betrayers, differing here from most scholars (and from Paz), who view him as the nun's friend and supporter.

14. Nissa Torrents, "One Woman's Cinema: Interview with María Luisa Bemberg," in *Knives and Angels*, 174.