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**Timeless Feminist Resistance Defying Dominant Discourses in Sor Juana's "Hombres necios" And Margaret Atwood's "A Women's Issue"**

**Timeless Feminist Resistance Defying Dominant  
Discourses in Sor Juana's "Hombres necios"  
And Margaret Atwood's "A Women's Issue"**

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**A**t first glance, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Margaret Atwood may appear to share only one commonality: their gender. Separated by more than three centuries of literary tradition and situated at polar ends of the North American continent, these two women could not have lived in more contrasting eras and environments. While one can unearth distinct differences in the tone, emphasis, and approach of each writer, an examination of the issues dealt with in their poetry can provide an essential connection: both

poets exhibit feminist resistance to the dominant discourses of their day.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (c. 1648-1694), often hailed as the “Tenth Muse of Mexico”<sup>1</sup> and the “First Feminist in the New World,”<sup>2</sup> was a remarkable woman. Best known for the ways in which she transcended the strict gender boundaries of seventeenth-century Mexico, Sor Juana accomplished a stunning number of firsts for women in the New World during her short yet fascinating life. An intense lover of learning and in constant pursuit of knowledge, Sor Juana is known to have amassed a library of at least four thousand books, the largest in Mexico at the time (Reese 54). A frequent participant in intellectual and social debates, Sor Juana authored several works, the most famous being her “La Respuesta a Sor Filotea” (“Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filotea de la Cruz”),<sup>3</sup> which boldly defended a woman’s right to education. While Sor Juana has been praised as the finest Latin American poet of the Baroque period, she has also been called “one of the most carnal bards of all time: bawdy, tactile, fiery, elegiac, [hitting] multiple notes, always insisting on the importance of desire” (Manrique 11).

In order to appreciate, let alone begin any sort of meaningful discussion of Sor Juana and her poetry, it is imperative first to understand the social conditions in Mexico during her lifetime and in turn the dominant discourses against and with which she composed her poetry. According to Dorothy Schons, author of the landmark article, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz,”

moral conditions were extremely lax in seventeenth-century Mexico, creating a dangerous world for women, as the “male element of the population was under no restraint (even the priesthood was no exception) and roamed at will, preying on society. Not only immorality, but depravity [. . .] reigned” (41). In order to illustrate the severity of the conditions, Schons cites an entry in a seventeenth-century chronicle that notes the death of a cleric, praising the fact that he had actually remained a virgin throughout his life.<sup>4</sup> Still, society and the church viewed women as the root of temptation and therefore the cause of the aforementioned evil. In her discussion of Mexico’s moral conditions, Schons notes the attitudes of two important ecclesiastics of Sor Juana’s time, Francisco de Aguiar y Seixas, Archbishop of Mexico from 1682 to 1698, and Antonio Núñez, Sor Juana’s confessor. Both men believed that in order to preserve their chastity they had to avoid the temptation of women at all costs. For Seixas, guarding himself from evil meant not looking a woman in the face and even thanking God for his nearsightedness. For, Núñez even the touch of a woman could mean compromising his virtue so he always covered his hands with his mantle.<sup>5</sup> As Schons’ research makes evident, the prevailing cultural script of 17<sup>th</sup> century Mexico was one in which a woman was cast in the traditional Western role of *femme fatale*.

Into this atmosphere of medieval attitudes concerning women, Sor Juana was born, the illegitimate child of a Spanish-born father and a criolla mother (Paz 65). An extremely inquisitive child, Sor Juana learned to read

at the age of three after following her older sister to school. Once she acquired this ability, nothing could stop her—Sor Juana’s thirst for knowledge drove her to study anything that was available, including the Latin and Aztec languages, mathematics, logic, history, and classical literature (Reese 54). When Sor Juana was between the ages of eight and ten, she was sent to live with an aunt and uncle in Mexico City, where she continued to accumulate knowledge and skill (Paz 86).

In 1664, at the age of fifteen, Sor Juana was introduced to the newly arrived Vicereine, Doña Leonor Carreto, Marquise de Mancera. Immediately impressed, Leonor enlisted Sor Juana as one of her ladies-in-waiting (Paz 88). It was during this time in her life that Sor Juana first employed her literary talents as a method to honor her royal friends. Some of Sor Juana’s most famous and most commonly translated poems are dedicated to Leonor, who is referred to as Laura in the text: “Divine Laura, My Life Was Always Yours,” and “Elegy,” which consists of three parts—“Drunk with Laura’s Beauty,” “Laura Split in Two Beautiful Halves,” and “Laura, Desire Dies with You.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, according to Paz, “more than half of [Sor Juana’s] literary output consists of poems for ceremonial occasions: homages, epistles, congratulations, poems to commemorate the death of an Archbishop or the birth of a magnate” (186).

After five years of court life, Sor Juana entered the convent of San Jerónimo in 1669, at the age of twenty. While she no longer resided at the Viceregal court, Sor Juana continued to develop close relationships with New

Spain's royalty, as well as writing for and about them. In particular, Sor Juana became especially intimate with María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Countess de Paredes de Nava, wife of Don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, the Marquis de la Laguna, the Viceroy of Mexico from 1680 to 1686. According to Paz, the Countess became the "emotional center" of Sor Juana's life for several years, inspiring countless poems, including "When a Slave Gives Birth" and the famous "My Divine Lysi"<sup>7</sup> (Paz 195).

So far we have discussed Sor Juana's poetry only in light of courtly adulation, but her poetic works go far beyond royal dedication to include stunning social commentary on the dominant discourse of 17<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. These poems become all the more astonishing when placed in the context of the literature produced during her time, "a literature for the few, erudite, academic, profoundly religious (in a dogmatic rather than a creative sense), hermetic, and aristocratic, [...] written by men to be read by men" (Paz 45). The dominant discourse of the Spanish and Mexican cultural scene was controlled by men like Lope de Vega, Góngora, Quevedo, and Calderón, yet Sor Juana was able to engage in this rigid, hierarchal system, even publishing her poetry in Spain. This was possible, according to Stephanie Merrim, editor of the groundbreaking collection, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* and author of "Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism," because of Sor Juana's patronage and acceptance by the court, which allowed for "the considerable autonomy

from conventual strictures so essential to her intellectual endeavors. In philosophical terms it might be said that, for Sor Juana, to accede to knowledge involved allying herself with the reigning (masculine) tradition” (22). In addition, Merrim notes Sor Juana’s belief in an androgynous soul and her previously mentioned defense of a woman’s right to education. Putting all of these pieces together, Merrim declares that “rather than asserting or projecting women’s ‘difference,’ both ideologically and literarily Sor Juana sought to *negate* their difference, to introject or appropriate the masculine realm for the feminine and to place them on the same continuum” (23). This is an essential argument to keep in mind when examining Sor Juana’s poetry, especially in light of New Spain’s prevailing cultural script, which excluded and stigmatized women.

In addition to a brief examination of the dominant discourse, we must also explore Sor Juana’s role as a feminist writer and her works in relation to other feminist writings. According to Merrim, this is where the greatest challenge lies—“situating Sor Juana’s work within the traditions of women’s writing, both universal and within her own milieu” (25). This is necessary, Merrim maintains, because evolving feminist criticism demands “substantive comparative studies” of women writers (26). In order to remedy this gap in Sor Juana criticism and to arrive at a working understanding of Sor Juana’s work on its own terms, Merrim suggests that Sor Juana be studied in light of women writers, including her predecessors, her contemporaries, and her descendents. By viewing Sor

Juana's writings in light of Margaret Atwood's work, and *vice versa*, it becomes possible to further situate both writers in the women's literary tradition. An analysis of the issues addressed in Sor Juana's famous poem "Hombres necios" (Foolish Men) in comparison to those dealt with in Margaret Atwood's "A Women's Issue" will illustrate similarities, like the treatment of timeless feminist issues and tactics used to resist each writer's respective dominant discourse, while also highlighting important differences in each writer's tone, placement of emphasis, and approach.

Sor Juana's celebrated redonilla, "Hombres necios" (Foolish Men),<sup>8</sup> which contains seventeen octosyllabic quatrains, is a stunning logical argument that resists seventeenth-century Mexico's prevailing discourse of an exclusively male academic world, as well as the permeating ideology that women are inherently evil. In order to "argue for the female as a bastion of reason," Merrim writes that Sor Juana "'cannibalizes' the topic of love, using it as a pretext for philosophical debates and as a showcase for her own lucid reasoning" (25). In the opening lines of her poem, Sor Juana writes:

Misguided men, who will chastise  
a woman when no blame is due,  
oblivious that it is you  
who prompted what you criticize. (149)

This outright accusation reverses the male's chastisement of the feminine sex, pointing out that men wrongly fault women for problems they create themselves, not the other way around. By portraying men as illogical and hypocritical,

Sor Juana challenges her readers to rethink the dominant discourse of an all-male academic world. Three quatrains later, Sor Juana addresses this issue again:

Your daring must be qualified,  
 your sense is no less senseless than  
 the child who calls the boogeyman,  
 then weeps when he is terrified. (149)

In these lines, Sor Juana emphasizes men's irrational reasoning and behavior, in addition to "[chiding them] for usurping the bodies and minds of women and [laughing] at them for immaturely creating a monster [. . .] and scaring themselves" (Arenal 128). Here, the poem works to resist seventeenth-century Mexico's prevailing script because Sor Juana reduces the man, along with his masculinity and supposed superior reasoning skills, to a frightened and uneducated child.

Two quatrains later, Sor Juana reiterates her resistance to the idea that women are less rational than men, writing, "If knowingly one clouds a mirror/ [. . .] can he lament that it's not clearer?" (149). In her signature fashion, Sor Juana employs a brilliant metaphor phrased as a question, forcing her reader to consider the ideological belief that men possess superior intellectual and reasoning skills. These lines, as well as those discussed above, clearly express Sor Juana's desire to negate gender differences in order to place men and women on the same continuum.

"Hombres necios" also challenges the concept of the *femme fatale*. To do this, Sor Juana explores the male's double standard and the virgin/whore dichotomy, transferring

blame from women to men and reversing the Christian “Fall from Grace.” In the ninth quatrain of her poem, Sor Juana writes,

You men are such a foolish breed,  
appraising with a faulty rule,  
the first you charge with being cruel,  
the second, easy, you decree. (151)

These lines, exposing the irrationality of male desire, boldly indict all men alike. Sor Juana’s assessment recognizes the ability of a man to harm a woman’s reputation and disgrace her honor, as well as his willingness to quickly cast blame upon women. In like manner, Sor Juana’s next quatrain implicitly stresses the hypocrisy of the virgin/whore dichotomy, “if not willing, she offends,/ but willing, she infuriates.” (151). These lines emphasize the existence and acceptance of double standards in seventeenth-century Mexico. In addition, Sor Juana’s poignant statement illustrates how disadvantageous these duplicities are to women.

In the fourteenth quatrain of “Hombres necios,” Sor Juana addresses the timeless issue of prostitution:

Whose is the greater guilt therein  
when either’s conduct may dismay:  
she who sins and takes the pay,  
or he who pays her for the sin? (151)

By phrasing these lines as a question, Sor Juana demands that her reader reassess existing beliefs about the assignment of guilt and shame in the society of seventeenth-century Mexico. Although she does not condone prostitution, Sor

Juana makes it clear that she desires for men and women to be judged equally.

Sor Juana's most severe charge against men appears in the closing lines of her poem:

But no, I deem you still will revel  
in your arms and arrogance,  
and in promise and persistence  
adjoin flesh and world and devil. (151)

In her efforts to reverse the dominant discourse which empowers men, yet victimizes women, Sor Juana strongly associates the male sex with worldly desires. Rather than phrasing these lines as a question, Sor Juana forms them into a bold statement that confirms her feminist stance, as well as emphasizes her religious beliefs. In order to reverse the Christian "Fall from Grace," Sor Juana links men with the devil, transposing thousands of years of stigmatized guilt and shame from women to men.

The overall tone of "Hombres necios" is satirical, yet stunningly poignant. Although the poem is written in a very structured manner, its accusations transcend discourse, form, and translation. Words like "blame," "rule," "guilt," and "sin" appear in the poem, creating a tone that implicates men for taking advantage of women while evading the intense stigma of their desires.

In this poem, Sor Juana's emphasis is placed on male irrationality as well as a man's power to harm a woman by disgracing her honor and reputation. In this indictment, Sor Juana blames men as the cause of their own problems, as well as women's. By emphasizing the virgin/whore

dichotomy and the “Fall from Grace,” the poem portrays the double standards of men, which often leave women in unwinnable situations.

Two-hundred and forty-five years after Sor Juana’s death, Margaret Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada on November 18, 1939. As a writer of enormous range, Atwood has composed prize-winning works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. With her writing spanning over four decades, she is an unquestionably accomplished author whose texts tend to emphasize universal as well as personal matters.

“A Women’s Issue,” appearing as part of the sequence “Notes Towards a Poem that Can Never Be Written” in Atwood’s poetry collection *True Stories*, clearly illustrates Atwood’s concern with feminist issues. Printed in 1981, this poem accurately reflects the social conditions surrounding Atwood at the time of publication. According to Shirley Neuman, author of ““Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” the atmosphere between the years of 1965 and 1985 signified considerable progress for women’s rights, including improvements in “access to higher education and the professions, in employment equity, in access to legal abortion, and in divorce law,” yet by 1984, the women’s movement had come under attack in the United States (858). To illustrate this point, Neuman cites some stunning statistics from the years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency (1981-1989):

[W]omen made up an increasing percentage of those in the lowest-paid occupations [...], the number of elected and politically

appointed women declined, [and] one-third of all federal budget cuts under Reagan's presidency came from programs that served mainly women, even though these programs represented only 10 per cent of the federal budget. [...] Murders related to sexual assault and domestic violence increased by 160 per cent [...], the federal government defeated bills to fund shelters for battered women, stalled already approved funding, and in 1981 closed down the Office of Domestic Violence it had opened only two years earlier. (859-860)

Abortion rights also came under attack—some states not only made it illegal but also passed laws restricting the dissemination of information about it; clinics were bombed, and Medicaid stopped funding the procedure (Neuman 860). Just as this freedom of choice was being eliminated, many women coming of age in North America began to resist the ideals of feminism. As Neuman explains, young women “in the confidence born of their mothers' success, in the desire for self-differentiation that ever characterizes the young, overly credulous of the media and perhaps anxious to find a man, asserted that they didn't need feminism” (861).

As is obvious, the dominant discourse surrounding Atwood is in stark contrast to that of Sor Juana's. Emerging during a period of dramatic improvement in women's rights, the cultural script of North America in the 1980s no longer excluded women from its literary world but instead

eagerly welcomed their works. Nevertheless, the prevailing discourse was also influenced by a regression or “backlash” against the women’s movement, increasing violence towards women, and general public apathy.

Writing within a discourse heavily influenced by feminism, Atwood has often rejected the ‘feminist’ label as applied to her writing. In a 1985 interview with feminist theorist Elizabeth Meese, the poet defined the kind of feminist she was and was not. Although she firmly expressed her belief in “‘the rights of women...[as] equal human beings,’” Atwood rejected “feminist or doctrinaire separatism,” stating, “‘if practical, hardline, anti-male feminists took over and became the government, I would resist them’” (Neuman 858).

We should not assume that Atwood’s resistance of the label ‘feminist’ means that feminism has not influenced her work. In reality, quite the opposite is true. In 1984, Alicia Ostriker wrote of contemporary women’s poetry, including Atwood’s, “the overwhelming sensation to be gotten [...] is the smell of camouflage burning, the crackle of anger, free at last, the whirl and rush of flamelike rage that has so often swept the soul, and as often been damped down, so that we never thought there could be words for it” (485). This description, summarizing the momentous freedom felt by many in the women’s movement, places Atwood’s poetry, particularly her 1971 collection *Power Politics*, in the realm of feminist writing. In describing the poems found in Atwood’s collection, Ostriker notes that “sex is violence; love is a banal addiction involving the surrender of self to

sentimental stereotype” (487). As we will see, Ostriker’s observation proves to apply to “A Women’s Issue,” which literally dissects issues that women have been dealing with for hundreds of years.

In dissecting timeless topics of concern for women, “A Women’s Issue” provides a shocking analysis that resists the dominant discourse of 1980s North America. To do this, Atwood employs the metaphorical theme of a museum throughout the poem, introducing various women as “Exhibit A,” “Exhibit B,” and “Exhibit C” (68). Her extended metaphor challenges the prevailing cultural script by forcing readers to deal with shocking images of oppressed women. The first two stanzas of the poem wryly present a woman in a chastity belt or a “spiked device/ that locks around the waist and between/ the legs, with holes in it like a tea strainer” and a woman “in black with a net window/ to see through and a four-inch/ wooden peg jammed up/ between her legs so she can’t be raped” (68). Atwood’s alarming descriptions boldly acknowledge the ways in which sexuality is used to repress women, just as those of Sor Juana did.

The third stanza of Atwood’s poem introduces the reader to a young girl who is “dragged into the bush by the midwives/ and made to sing while they scrape the flesh/ from between her legs, [...]” (68). These lines imply a strong lack of choice. By involving women in the act of mutilation, Atwood makes them complicit in the oppression. Accordingly, blame is placed upon the culture, rather than one gender or the other. Atwood furthers this accusation with her next lines:

Now she can be married.  
 For each childbirth they'll cut her  
 open, then sew her up.  
 Men like tight women.

The ones that die are carefully buried. (68)

Here both men and women function as part of a culture that represses women because of their sexuality. As Atwood makes clear, women are required to surrender their happiness, pleasure, and perhaps even their lives to satisfy men. There is no room for “love” in Atwood’s depiction of misogynist culture.

Atwood’s fourth stanza, like Sor Juana’s fourteenth quatrain, addresses the issue of prostitution. Atwood writes, “The next exhibit lies flat on her back/ while eighty men a night/ move through her, ten an hour” (68). This blunt description foregoes the discussion of choice—there is none. In stark contrast to Sor Juana’s quatrain, which implies a mutual guilt, Atwood’s lines make it clear that this woman is oppressed. The stanza continues,

She looks at the ceiling, listens  
 to the door open and close.  
 A bell keeps ringing.

Nobody knows how she got here. (68)

In these lines, Atwood resists the dominant discourse by illustrating the danger of cultural apathy. By compelling her reader to question existing beliefs and behaviors, Atwood challenges willed ignorance. In addition, Atwood’s description encourages her reader to bear witness to the oppression of women in order to put an end to it.

The fifth stanza of “A Women’s Issue” begins by summarizing the previous descriptions and asking a question: “You’ll notice that what they have in common/ is between the legs. Is this/ why wars are fought?” (69). These lines, which further depict sexuality as the cause of women’s oppression, encourage questioning of the cultural motives for repressing women. Atwood continues her stanza by making the bodies of women the bloody battleground where these wars are fought:

Enemy territory, no man’s  
land, to be entered furtively,  
fenced, owned but never surely,  
scene of these desperate forays  
at midnight, captures  
and sticky murders, doctors’ rubber gloves  
greasy with blood, flesh made inert, the  
surge of your own uneasy power. (69)

In demonstrating how injurious and at times deadly women’s oppression can be, Atwood illustrates the extreme differences of power found in the dominant discourse. In addition, her disturbing images force readers to confront cultural apathy and the “backlash” against the women’s movement that resulted in budget cuts that affected a women’s choice to leave an abusive husband or get an abortion.

In the last two lines of “A Women’s Issue,” Atwood recalls the museum metaphor but completely turns it around: “This is no museum. Who invented the word *love*?” (69). By reversing her metaphor, Atwood makes it clear that her descriptions are not of a far-off land in a time long ago, but

of right here and right now. In addition, her question implies that the fairy-tale notion of love cannot exist along with women's oppression.

The overall tone of Atwood's poem is one that recalls the "personal is political" message of the 1970s in which women came to understand enduring personal issues as political problems that resulted from systematic oppression. Accordingly, "A Women's Issue" urgently demands that readers bear witness in order to avoid willed ignorance and to achieve social empowerment and justice. To do this, the tone is not only urgent but also physical and violent. Words like "flesh," "blood," "wars," "murders," "jammed," "raped," "dragged," "scrape," "scabs," "cut," and "buried" appear, creating shocking and disturbing imagery that implies the danger of cultural apathy.

In her poem, Atwood places emphasis on the extreme differences of power between men and women and how these differences contribute to a man's power to inflict emotional and physical harm to a woman. Throughout her poem, Atwood also emphasizes the females' lack of choice in each "exhibit." None of the women she describes has chosen to be part of this dark display, yet feminist "backlash" and cultural apathy have allowed for the systematic oppression that results in Atwood's violent descriptions.

After closely examining each poem, it is apparent that there are clear differences in tone and emphasis which result in contrasting approaches to three specific issues: placement of blame, the ways in which men can harm women, and prostitution. In "Hombres necios," Sor Juana

places the blame and guilt for women's oppression solely on men. In contrast, "A Women's Issue" faults the culture as a whole. When considering a man's ability to harm a woman, Sor Juana views the mind and soul as what is damaged, while for Atwood the harm is done to the woman's body. Lastly, both poets address prostitution with the intent that readers question the dominant discourse, yet they approach the issue very differently. Sor Juana, as a nun writing in seventeenth-century Mexico, did not and possibly could not fully sympathize with the woman in that situation. Atwood's position greatly differs in that she portrays the woman as a victim of man and culture.

Despite these differences, comparing Sor Juana and Atwood serves to illustrate a common trait—both writers use poetry to challenge their respective dominant discourses. To do this, both poets address issues that deeply affect women. In their treatment of these subjects, they demand that their readers question existing beliefs and accepted behaviors in order to reverse cultural scripts that oppress women. By making this connection, both Sor Juana and Atwood can be more firmly placed in the feminist tradition of women's writing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Ludwig Pfandl, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: La décima musa de México*, ed. Francisco de la Maza (Mexico: UNAM, 1963); Paz 275 (Part V: The Tenth Muse); Enrique Alberto Arias, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Music: Mexico’s ‘Tenth Muse,’” *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women: Many-Headed Melodies*, ed. Thomasin LaMay (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 311.

<sup>2</sup> See Dorothy Schons, “The First Feminist in the New World,” *Equal Rights* 12.38 (1925): 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> See Margaret Sayers Peden’s translation in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream: Selected Writings*, 2-75.

<sup>4</sup> For the chronicle entry, see Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 41.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the attitudes of Seixas and Núñez, including excerpts from their biographies, see Schons 41-42.

<sup>6</sup> See Sor Juana, *Sor Juana’s Love Poems*, trans. Joan Larkin and Jaime Manrique (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1997), 64-67 and 68-75.

<sup>7</sup> See Sor Juana, *Sor Juana’s Love Poems*, 12-15 and 16-21.

<sup>8</sup> See Margaret Sayers Peden's translation in *Poems, Protest, and a Dream: Selected Writings*, 148-151.

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