

A Baroque Drama:
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Crisis* in Seventeenth-Century New Spain
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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a Hieronymite nun who lived in the latter half of the seventeenth-century in colonial New Spain. She is one of the most well-known nuns from the colonial era because she was a prolific Baroque poet and playwright. Renowned in her own lifetime, Sor Juana published two volumes of her works in Spain during her lifetime. It would seem then that Sor Juana's life should have been filled with accolades and prestige, and, to an extent, it was so. Sor Juana's parlor in the Convent of St. Jerome in Mexico City teemed with aristocratic visitors, including the viceroy and vicereine. However, the attention that Sor Juana received for her intelligence and erudition also had negative consequences.

To some of Sor Juana's male ecclesiastical superiors, the number of visitors that Sor Juana entertained in her parlor indicated that Sor Juana was more interested in worldly affairs than in her sacred duty as a nun. In the seventeenth century, the amount of time that nuns spent receiving guests became a source of distress amongst prelates. To remove this source of distraction, the prelates "engaged in a reforming drive in the last quarter of the seventeenth century."¹ Their agenda included "reducing visitors to relatives only, prohibiting conversations with men, and even reporting visits of small boys inside the cloister."² Despite the desire of some men to control life in the convent, the nuns operated the convent according to their own communal interests. In the case of the Convent of St. Jerome, it was in the interest of the sisters to permit Sor Juana to host aristocrats and secular scholars in her parlor, for such visits bestowed prestige on the whole convent. The disregard that some nuns demonstrated for the reforms that male Church leaders wanted to enforce made these male authorities more determined to reform the convents of New Spain. Since regulation by males of an all-female convent was not perfect, the male leaders would need to find a different, more subtle way to reform the convents. An opportunity to do just that occurred in 1691 when Sor Juana was hosting some guests, whose identities are unknown, in her parlor.

In that year, Sor Juana was asked about her opinion on Father Antonio Vieira's Maundy Thursday sermon from 1650. Although Sor Juana answered the question in person, the guest asked her to write her opinion. Although there is no way to know what the guest's intention was when he asked for the letter, it raises the question whether asking Sor Juana to write down her opinion was a premeditated step in planning her downfall. Whatever the motive may have been, Sor Juana must not have realized how precarious her situation was. Within three months, she sent her written opinion to the guest who had requested it. This missive was meant to be a private correspondence,

¹ Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 146.

² Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 146.

but when the content of the letter became public knowledge, Sor Juana and her way of life were under attack.

In her letter, which would come to be known by the name *The Letter Worthy of Athena*, Sor Juana refuted Father Vieira's opinion about God's greatest gift. This letter was published in 1691 without her consent by the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz. Another letter, ostensibly written by another nun, Sister Philotea de la Cruz, accompanied the *Letter Worthy of Athena*. Sister Philotea offered a criticism of Sor Juana's original letter.³ Yet, the *Letter from Sister Philotea*, was not written by a nun at all but by the Bishop of Puebla himself.⁴ The bishop's public criticism of the famous poet precipitated the writing of a series of letters in defense of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's theological commentary, most notably Sor Juana's *Answer to Sister Philotea* and the *Letter from Sister Seraphina*, the author of which is unknown. However, the *Letter Worthy of Athena* did not provoke only praise. A letter from "the Soldier," now lost, and a letter from a Sister Margarida are two examples of criticism that Sor Juana confronted.

There are numerous reasons as to why Sor Juana's *Letter Worthy of Athena* was so sensationalized. Many forces converged to transform an "act of arrogance" into a religious crisis. By 1691, Sor Juana's great protectors, the Viceroy of Mexico, Tomás de la Cerda and the Vicereine, the Countess of Paredes, had returned to Spain. The Archbishop of Mexico Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, who felt a strong antipathy for Sor Juana's secular works, believed that Sor Juana had overstepped her boundaries and required strict discipline if she was to become a virtuous nun. Sor Juana had also made another powerful enemy, her ex-confessor the Jesuit priest, Antonio de Núñez. In 1680 Sor Juana decided to relieve Father Núñez of his role as her confessor because there were reports that Núñez denigrated Sor Juana publicly, rather than discuss his concerns with her privately. These factors, in addition to the fact that Sor Juana's spiritual sisters did not explicitly condemn the attacks against Sor Juana, caused the onslaught against Sor Juana to be unendurable.

With Sor Juana in a vulnerable position, the male ecclesiastical leaders, who wanted nuns to change their ill behavior, decided that the first nun in need of reformation was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The attack against Sor Juana, then, was initiated under pseudonyms because the male ecclesiastical leaders were attempting to find a way to infiltrate the convent in order to implement their discipline without overt interference, which would be resisted by the nunnery. Ironically, this attempt by the male prelates of New Spain to reform the Convent of St. Jerome would stand as an example in the final decades of the eighteenth century for the nuns who would find themselves besieged with the demands to institute *vida común* (living in common).

³Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Autobiographical Writing by Early Modern Hispanic Women* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 177.

⁴ The pseudonym Philotea was used in St. Francis de Sale's *Introduction to the Devout Life*. This book, published in 1609, was an instructional guide on how to live piously for women who chose to marry rather than live a chaste life. Each letter was addressed to Philotea (lover of God) so that the guide would be used widely.

Father Antonio Vieira's Sermon in the Royal Chapel (1650)

In 1650, Father Antonio Vieira (1608-1697), a well-known Jesuit priest, Portuguese statesman, and confessor to Queen Christina of Sweden, preached a sermon about God's greatest gift to humanity in the Royal Chapel in Portugal on Maundy Thursday. In his sermon, he refuted three Church Fathers, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. John Chrysostom, who each understood God's greatest gift to humankind to be something different. Vieira then offered his own opinion about God's greatest gift.

Father Vieira began his sermon by asserting that "Christ's love for man, from the first instant, of his Incarnation until the last instant of his life, was always the same."⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that God's love for humanity never wavered, Vieira argued that there was still an important question to answer: "Of all God's great gifts at the end of his life, which was the greatest?"⁶

In answer to this question, Vieira refuted St. Augustine's opinion that "God's greatest gift for humanity was to die for us."⁷ Though Augustine's opinion may have seemed compelling to many Christians who understood that Jesus sacrificed his life to wash away the sins of the world, Vieira believed that they were confused as to what Jesus's real sacrifice had been. Vieira postulated, "Our Lord Christ loved humanity more than He loved His life"; therefore, it could not be said that to die was God's greatest gift, for the greatest gift must entail the greatest sacrifice.⁸ Vieira argued that "to die was to leave life, to absent himself was to leave humanity."⁹ To Christ, losing His life was not so painful as abandoning mankind. Nevertheless, Vieira argued that Christ's absencing Himself from mankind was not God's greatest gift because the "Eucharist was the remedy for absence."¹⁰

Second, Vieira rejected Saint Thomas Aquinas's opinion that God's greatest gift was to stay with us even when He absented Himself from us by enclosing Himself in the Sacrament.¹¹ However, Vieira points out that this could not be God's greatest gift because the "mystery of the Eucharist should be remembrance and a recapitulation of Passion of Christ."¹² If Christ, as he exists in the Eucharist, has no use of his senses, then the Sacrament of the Eucharist only mirrors Christ's Passion when, "with his eyes covered. . . He was deprived of the sight of man, whom He

⁵ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, in *Obras Completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Comedias, Sainetes y Prosa*, ed. Alberto G. Salceda (Toluca, México: Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, 1957), 673-694 at 673, trans. author.

⁶ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 673, trans. author.

⁷ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 674, trans. author.

⁸ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 675, trans. author.

⁹ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 675, trans. author.

¹⁰ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 677, trans. author.

¹¹ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 678, trans. author.

¹² Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 678, trans. author.

loved so much.”¹³ Because Christ is “impassive” in the Eucharist, He does not suffer so much as a human who is deprived of his senses. Therefore, if this gift can be outdone by imperfect humans, then His greatest gift must lie elsewhere.

Third, Vieira discredited Saint John Chrysostom’s opinion that “God’s greatest gift was to wash the disciples’ feet.”¹⁴ If washing the disciples’ feet had been God’s greatest expression of love, then the action would have to be narrowed down to Christ’s washing the feet of Judas. The act of washing Judas’s feet demonstrated Christ’s humility, but more importantly, it demonstrated that Christ “gave His gifts equally to those who were unequal in their worthiness by treating the unworthy as if they were worthy.”¹⁵ Judas clearly was in no way worthy of Christ’s attention, yet since, Jesus loved all men equally even those who would treat Him poorly, and so Judas was not excluded from Christ’s display of love.

Finally, Vieira revealed his own views as to what constitutes God’s greatest gift: Christ’s mandate that “the love with which He loved us be transformed into love for each other.”¹⁶ Christ did not want the love that He showed us to be returned to Him, but rather to be shown to one another. In short, we could repay God’s love for us by loving our fellow man. To support his argument, Vieira reminded his congregation that, “as a farewell God gave us a new mandate, and that was to love one another.”¹⁷ Christ’s last commandment constituted Christ’s final and most important gift. To please God, humans must love each other unconditionally.

Even though Vieira refuted Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint John Chrysostom’s beliefs about God’s greatest expression of His love, Vieira’s own assessment of God’s greatest gift was not so different from those of the three saints. All four men acknowledged that Christ loved His children infinitely; therefore, they each chose a sacrifice that compelled Jesus to abandon His life or His people as God’s greatest gift. The similarity of each choice should not be surprising when one considers that they were all men who had been steeped in ecclesiastical tradition. It is hardly surprising, then, that this sermon, although it explicitly refutes the opinions of venerated Church Fathers, was itself not a source of controversy because Father Vieira, as a part of the Catholic status quo, was allowed to have a voice. He could freely express his views, within certain bounds, without fearing backlash. Sor Juana, on the other hand, held no such privileged position.

¹³ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 680, trans. author.

¹⁴ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 684, trans. author.

¹⁵ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 681, trans. author.

¹⁶ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 681, trans. author.

¹⁷ Padre Antonio Vieira, *Sermón del Padre Vieira en la Capilla Real*, 681, trans. author.

Crisis de un Sermón (La Carta Atenagórica or The Letter Worthy of Athena [1691])

In 1691, Sor Juana wrote a critique of Father Vieira's sermon which she entitled, *Crisis de un Sermón*, at the request of an unnamed superior. Most likely she wrote this work without intending that it would be published. Nonetheless, the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún, did publish the document, renaming it *The Letter Worthy of Athena* in the process. Although the reasons for renaming the document are unknown, one can speculate that he did so because he respected Sor Juana's intelligence. Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war, and thus, a formidable opponent.

On the face of it, Sor Juana's argument should not have attracted so much criticism, since, in this document, Sor Juana defended the Church Fathers' interpretations of God's greatest gifts. Nevertheless, the very act of interpreting Biblical passages and speaking about it publicly (or publishing it) was believed by some male Church leaders to be prohibited to a woman by 1 Corinthians 14:34, which stated that "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission." 1 Timothy 2:11-12 reiterated this prohibition on female speech: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. . . And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence." Although Paul's dictum did not really forbid women from speaking in Church, some men manipulated the quote to keep women in a subservient position. In addition, the fact that the quote from the Book of Timothy was likely a forgery did not stop men from using it when it served their purposes. The leaders of the New Spanish Church used these passages to support their stance that Sor Juana had no right to write about theological questions. They maintained that some men were permitted to debate theology, but women were meant to accept uncritically the conclusions that men drew. Sor Juana demonstrated that she did not accept this explanation in her *Answer to Sister Philotea* when she wrote,

Women are not allowed to lecture publicly in the universities or to preach from the pulpits, but studying, writing, and teaching privately is not only permitted but most beneficial and useful. Clearly, of course, this does not mean that all women should do so, but only those whom God may have seen fit to endow with special virtue and prudence, and who are very mature and erudite and possess the necessary talents and requirements for such a sacred occupation. And so just is this distinction that not only women, who are held to be incompetent, but also men, who simply because they are men think themselves wise, are to be prohibited from the interpretation of the Sacred Word, save when they are most learned, virtuous, of amenable intellect and inclined to do good.¹⁸

¹⁸ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, in *The Answer/ La Respuesta*, ed. and trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009), 51-105 at 81.

Sor Juana did not believe that speaking publicly was barred to women only when so few men were knowledgeable enough to speak intelligently. Instead, she interpreted the passage to mean that anyone who was not knowledgeable was not permitted to teach in public. This left a space for exceptional women, such as Sor Juana, to interpret Scripture.

It is clear, then, that without reading even one line of Sor Juana's treatise that her decision to write the *Letter* would be disapproved of by the Church authorities. However, the arguments that appear in the *Letter* only made the disapproval for Sor Juana increase. After Sor Juana conveyed the expected pleasantries and formulaic expressions of modesty, Sor Juana stated that "her purpose was to defend herself [her opinion about God's greatest gift] with the reasons that the Saintly Fathers had given."¹⁹

First, Sor Juana defended Saint Augustine's assertion that God's greatest gift was to die for humanity by arguing that "the most esteemed things to man are his life and his honor and Christ gave both in his ignominious death."²⁰ Unlike Vieira's argument that Christ loved humanity more than his own life, Sor Juana emphasized Christ's own humanity when she points out that all *men* value their lives and honor more than any other worldly thing. Just as "man does not have more than he can give than his life," so too was Christ's greatest gift to sacrifice His life for all mankind.²¹ Therefore, Christ's death, not His absence, amounted to the greatest sacrifice. Sor Juana stated simply that "absence is only absence; death is death and absence."²² In His death, Christ lost the things He loved most: His life, His honor, and His presence amongst His children.

Second, Sor Juana defended Saint Thomas's opinion that God's greatest expression of love was to remain with us in the Eucharist. In this section, Sor Juana accuses Vieira of having made a fallacious genus-to-species argument in defending his view that the greater gift was Christ remaining in the Eucharist without the use of His senses.²³ Sor Juana believed that the saint's assertion included the assertion that Vieira made. Aquinas had not characterized Christ in the Eucharist; therefore, it is plausible that the Saint may have thought that Christ was bereft of the use of His senses in the Eucharist. However, Sor Juana, not content to concede any point to Vieira, pointed out that, in the event that Christ had the use of His senses while in the Eucharist, this would amount to the greater gift.²⁴ If Christ was cognizant of what was happening while in the Eucharist form, then He could be conscious of the presence of His children, but also He would be aware of the ill treatment that He received from some people. The continued use of His senses in the Eucharist, therefore, was God's greater sacrifice.

¹⁹ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 413, trans. author.

²⁰ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 414, trans. author.

²¹ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 413, trans. author.

²² Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 420, trans. author.

²³ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 421, trans. author.

²⁴ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 421, trans. author.

Third, Sor Juana defends the view of Saint John Chrysostom, who believed that God's greatest gift was to wash the feet of His disciples. Once again, Sor Juana argues that Vieira's refutation of Chrysostom's argument was faulty: "Again we have, not very different than the past species-to-genus argument: this, of cause to effect."²⁵ That is, Saint John Chrysostom had merely pointed to Christ's washing the feet of His disciples as His greatest gift; he had not explicitly addressed what the cause of Christ's actions was. However, Sor Juana defended Chrysostom by arguing that, when he chose Christ's washing of the disciples' feet as the greatest gift, Chrysostom recognized that "not only one cause but many causes manifest themselves in such an extraordinary effect of humiliating that Immense Majesty at the feet of men."²⁶ While Vieira narrowly assigned only one cause to Jesus's decision to wash His disciples' feet, Chrysostom was wise enough to recognize that Christ never has simply one cause: He is infinite and so are His works.

With her defense of the Church Fathers finished, Sor Juana confronted Vieira's chosen gift from God: "Christ does not want His love to be reciprocated to Himself but to one's fellow man."²⁷ Sor Juana, finding fault with Vieira's lack of Biblical examples to support his thesis, asserts the opposite of Christ. Sor Juana asked, "From whence do you infer that Christ does not want us to reciprocate His love to Him but that He desires us to love one another?"²⁸ The God that Sor Juana studied in the Bible was jealous. To illustrate this point, Sor Juana recites the story of Abraham and Isaac. God demanded that Abraham sacrifice his most beloved son, Isaac, in order to prove "which love mattered more to Abraham, his love of God or his love for his son."²⁹ This demand indicated that Christ was not content with second place in the hearts of his chosen people. "God is so jealous that He not only wants to be loved and preferred to all other things, but He wants that love to be evident and the whole world to know it."³⁰ God never renounced His right to be loved by His people. This decision to not give up mankind's love, Sor Juana argues, actually makes His gift greater.

Men want their love to be reciprocated because it is a benefit to themselves. Christ wants the same reciprocation for someone else's benefit, for the benefit of the men who give Him love. To me it seems that the author came close to this point, but went wrong and said the opposite; because, seeing Christ disinterested, he was persuaded that He did not want His love to be reciprocated. And the problem is that the author does not distinguish between reciprocation and the satisfaction of reciprocation. And this final concept is that which Christ renounced, not the reciprocation. And like that, the author's [Vieira's] proposition

²⁵ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 421, trans. author.

²⁶ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 421, trans. author.

²⁷ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 424, trans. author.

²⁸ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 424, trans. author.

²⁹ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 424, trans. author.

³⁰ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 424, trans. author.

is that Christ did not want reciprocation for Himself but for men. My proposition is that Christ wanted the reciprocation for Himself, but He wanted the satisfaction that results from that reciprocation for man.³¹

Christ still commanded that mankind love Him above all else, but now the good that resulted from one's love of God should be gifted to other human beings rather than to God Himself. To prove her point, Sor Juana focuses on the Old Testament God rather than confront the fact that the God of the New Testament did command his followers to love one another.

Although it would seem that Sor Juana had already defended three too many interpretations of God's greatest gift, she concluded her *Letter* by giving her own opinion on the matter. "I [Sor Juana] said that God's greatest gift, in my opinion, was the negative benefits: that is, the benefits that God does not give us because He knows that we have to repay them."³² The gifts that God withholds from His children are the greatest gifts that He can give to humanity.

God is all powerful and can create benefits for mankind, without difficulty for Him, and His desire is to do so. Therefore, God, when He gives gifts to man, goes with the natural current of His goodness, of His love, and of His power without costing Him anything. Therefore, when God does not provide benefits to mankind, because they are bound to become harmful to them, He suppresses the torrents of His immense liberality, He detains the sea of His infinite love, and He holds back the course of His absolute power.³³

Sor Juana proposes that God shows His immense love to humanity by not giving them all the gifts that they would like, for God knows that these gifts, if granted, would be damaging to the recipient. From this, the reader can infer that Sor Juana believed that free will was one of God's greatest gifts to humankind. By restricting the use of His 'absolute power,' God allows humankind to make the best use of the gifts that He has given them. To ask for and to receive limitless gifts would create 'ungrateful' human beings.³⁴ As Sor Juana pointed out, God's love for His children is limitless; therefore, to love them cannot be His greatest gift. The greatest gift must be the most profound expression of love: to allow a person to live without interference. God, in His infinite power, could make all humans perfect. This surely would please Him, but it would transform His children into slaves. Without free will, no person could demonstrate his or her love for God.

God gave humankind free will so that they would have the ability to show their love for Him through their actions. By following God's commandments (including the mandate to love one another as God loves His children) and following the example of Christ, humans can demonstrate their love to Christ. If God made these actions easy by granting infinite gifts, then they would hold

³¹ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 421, trans. author.

³² Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 435, trans. author.

³³ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 436, trans. author.

³⁴ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta Atenagórica*, 437, trans. author.

no meaning If God must curb His natural propensity to give His children many gifts in order to demonstrate His love, then His children should reciprocate by fighting against their naturally sinful natures and show their love towards Him.

Sister Philotea's Letter (1691)

As previously mentioned, *Sister Philotea's Letter* was published with the *Letter Worthy of Athena* in 1691. Using the pseudonym Philotea, the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún, entered into the fray, masquerading as a fellow nun.

That he [the Bishop of Puebla] does so [writes the letter] disguised as a woman is problematic. On the one hand, he 'places himself on a horizontal plane with Juana, desires to win her back to religion, to persuade her to abandon what is unsuitable to religion.' On the other, he exercises male authority over her (she knows his/her true identity) but at a remove (other readers may assume that Sor Filotea is actually a woman). Thus [here quoting Alfred Arteaga, "Chiasmus of the Woman Writer," 95] 'while the Bishop's letter vehemently asserts its femininity . . . Sor Filotea writes like a man. Her words . . . articulate those of the Bishop, for 'she' espouses the very precepts of the Spanish-Catholic patriarchy that codify the hierarchy (literally, the sacred rule) which locates the bishop and man above nun and woman.'³⁵

Choosing the name Philotea was not simply due to the meaning of the name, lover of God, but it also carried with it an allusion to St. Francis de Sales's work, *Introduction to the Devout Life*. This book, published in France in 1609, was an instruction manual on how to live a virtuous life for women who had chosen marriage rather than chastity.

However, using his own name would have provided greater spiritual authority as a man of the Church. One must wonder why the Bishop believed that the use of a pseudonym would be more effective in confronting Sor Juana. It seems likely that he wrote the *Letter* as Sister Philotea because the male ecclesiastical leaders wanted the nuns to reform their behavior. The Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, "wished to reform New Spanish convents according to his vision, forcing nuns to follow strict discipline."³⁶ However, male ecclesiastical authorities were well aware that enforcement of new protocols and stricter discipline was imperfect if carried out by males. Therefore, they would have to depend upon nuns to institute and enforce the changes that the prelates sought to impose. The Bishop of Puebla sought to do this by textually infiltrating the convent as a nun. Notwithstanding the fact that Sister Philotea did not exist, the Bishop of

³⁵ Howe, *Autobiographical Writing by Early Modern Hispanic Women*, quoting Alfred Arteaga, "Chiasmus of the Woman Writer: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," in *Literature and Quest*, ed. Christine Arkininstall (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 89-104 at 95.

³⁶ Grady Wray, "Sacred Allusions: Theology in Sor Juana's Works," in *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 65-76 at 67.

Puebla may have thought that Philotea's criticism would change Sor Juana's behavior and, to some degree, the lenient atmosphere of the convent.

However, it should be noted that the Bishop himself seems to forget that the role that he has chosen for himself. Unused to playing the woman, the Bishop sometimes loses sight of his thinly veiled identity: at one point s/he writes that Sor Juana "is an honor to *her* sex"³⁷ as though s/he has forgotten that Sister Philotea would also belong to this sex if she is a woman. Later, remembering the implications of her pseudonym, the author refers to womankind as "our sex."³⁸ More telling than Philotea's use of two different possessive pronouns is her lack of feminine modesty at the beginning of the letter. Although it could be argued that a nun who is addressing another nun may dispense with many pleasantries, Sister Philotea published her letter; therefore, the recipient was not merely Sor Juana, but also a powerful, male audience. With these considerations in mind, a real nun would not have begun the letter as Sister Philotea did: "I have seen the letter in which you refute Christ's gifts of love as defined by the Reverend Father Antonio de Vieira . . ." ³⁹ The straightforwardness of the prose indicates that the author was a person who wrote with authority. Assured of his/her position, the author did not waste time with pleasantries, but instead immediately addressed the issue at hand.

After praising Vieira's sermon as having been written with "such sagacity" by a "singular talent," the Bishop of Puebla concedes that Sor Juana's letter is indeed worthy of Athena: "But to my judgement, no one who reads your treatise can deny that you trimmed your quill even more deftly than either Bishop Menses or Father Vieira, and they could take great pride in being refuted by a woman who is an honor to her sex."⁴⁰ This adulation of Sor Juana was not made in jest. Sister Philotea seems genuinely to believe that Sor Juana's *Letter Worthy of Athena* was a valuable work. The Bishop goes on to write, "I, at least, have admired the lively wit of your conceits, the intelligence of your proofs, and the vigorous clarity with which you take on the subject. . . . This is one of the many benefits you owe to God, for clarity cannot be acquired by labor or effort; it is a gift infused in the soul."⁴¹ Sor Juana's gift, being a talented and lucid writer, is from God. It has been with her since she was created by God: "If as you say in your letter [the *Letter Worthy of Athena*], those who have received the most from God are under the greatest obligation to respond in kind, then I fear you may find yourself overtaken by your debt, for few of His creatures owe His Majesty greater natural talents for which gratitude is demanded so that if until now you have

³⁷ Sor Filotea de la Cruz, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, in *The Answer/ La Respuesta*, 2nd ed., trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009), 222-231 at 222.

³⁸ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 224.

³⁹ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 223.

⁴⁰ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 222.

⁴¹ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 223.

employed your talents well, in the future you may do so even better.”⁴² With all of her gifts from God, Sor Juana should repay her debt to God by using her talents in a way that would please Him.

Sister Philotea suggested that Sor Juana “imitate . . . [Saint Teresa and Gregory Nazianzus] not only in meter but in your choice of subject matter also.”⁴³ It would please God if Sor Juana would follow the example of other deeply religious writers and restrict her poetry to the subject of spirituality. “The Apostle Paul does not reprove learning as long as it does not take women from their position of obedience. It is known to all that your studies and learning have kept you in the state of a servant and helped to polish your excellence in the state of obedience. For where other nuns sacrifice their wills for the vow of obedience, you hold your mind captive, and this burnt offering is the most arduous and pleasing that can be made at the altar of religious life.”⁴⁴ The critical point of *Sister Philotea’s Letter* arrives when Philotea tells Sor Juana that “it is now high time for your pastimes to be perfected and your books to be improved.”⁴⁵ Sister Philotea makes the point that Sor Juana’s religious profession requires that she give up the outside world. Philosophers, mathematicians, playwrights, and scientists belong to that world. In the convent, she could have the comfort of studying the lives of the Messiah and the saints; however, those were the only acceptable subjects.

Philotea believed that Sor Juana had already spent enough time studying the secular disciplines, and, though these disciplines may be helpful in creating a scholarly foundation, the purpose of reading any of them was to better understand the Bible. When Sor Juana wrote secular love poetry or visited with laypeople in her parlor, she was valuing the secular more highly than the spiritual. Sister Philotea argued further that, beginning on this path, it was a slippery slope for Sor Juana to think about the lowliest of matters: “It is a pity when a person of great understanding stoops to lowly, swindling matters on earth, without longing to decipher what happens in Heaven; but once it rests down on the ground, may it still not sink further, considering what happens in Hell.”⁴⁶ Philotea’s message to Sor Juana was direct: change your behavior and look to the Holy Book for your inspiration.

If this message was not threatening and humiliating enough, Sister Philotea further took Sor Juana to task by refuting Sor Juana’s opinion about God’s greatest gift. Sister Philotea advised Sor Juana, if you contemplated the

. . . idea of divine perfection more. . . you would at once find your soul enlightened . . . and in this way the Lord, who has so abundantly showered you with positive gifts in the natural world, would not be obliged to grant you only negative ones in the hereafter. For no matter

⁴² Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 224.

⁴³ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 224.

⁴⁴ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 224.

⁴⁵ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 226.

⁴⁶ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 228.

how often your intelligence may call these benefits the favors of love, I myself hold them to be punishments.⁴⁷

Philotea denies Sor Juana's idea that God's withholding of benefits might be considered a gift, for a lack of a gift is to be regarded as a punishment. If Sor Juana did not recognize the gifts that God has given her here on earth and praise Him for it, then Philotea feared that Sor Juana would go to hell.

The Soldier

Since the 1990s some new documents relating to Sor Juana's life and the controversy of 1691 have been discovered. However, many documents that are known to have existed from "*La fineza mayor* (The greatest favor of love), a sermon that Francisco Javier Palavicino Villarasa preached on January 26, 1691 at Sor Juana's convent and published in Mexico the same year," would elucidate the breadth and nature of the controversy if found.⁴⁸ Villarasa's sermon "reveals that the most important and implacable enemy of Sor Juana was 'el Soldado' (the Soldier). We still do not know the context of this text or the author's identity. Sor Juana called him 'Su Paternidad' [His Paternity]; that is, she knew him and knew that the crudeness of the document did not suit its author's high position in the clergy."⁴⁹ The little information that is known of his letter provides another example of the virulence that Sor Juana must have withstood.

From what can be gleaned about the letter from the scant sources available, the letter must have been offensive and demeaning to Sor Juana. It seems as though the letter from the Soldier was different than the *Letter from Sister Philotea* because the Soldier did not show respect for Sor Juana's intellect or erudition. The personal nature of the Soldier's letter led to a very different response than that which Sister Philotea received from Sor Juana. The response to the Soldier was a biting and sarcastic letter written in defense of Sor Juana by another pseudonymous author, Sister Serafina.

The Letter from Serafina de Cristo

Serafina's *Letter* was lost for almost three-hundred years before it was discovered in a bookstore in Madrid. The document had been found originally in 1960 by a Jesuit historian, Manuel Pérez Alonso.⁵⁰ He thought the document was the first version of Sor Juana's *Answer to Sister Philotea*,

⁴⁷ Sor Filotea, *Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 228.

⁴⁸ Marie-Cecile Benassy-Berling, "The Afterlife of a Polemic: Conflicts and Discoveries Regarding Sor Juana's Letters," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Emilie L. Bergmann and Stacey Schlau (London: Routledge, 2017), 122-132 at 123.

⁴⁹ Benassy-Berling, "The Afterlife of a Polemic," 123.

⁵⁰ Antonio Alatorre and Martha Lilia Tenorio, *Serafina y Sor Juana* (México, D.F.: Colegio de México, 1998), 62.

but it was not until 1982 that the document was available to the public.⁵¹ Elías Trabulse, an historian from the Colegio de México, began to study the document. In 1996, he published the document and presented his findings at the International Colloquium on Sor Juana in Toluca, Mexico.

The *Letter from Serafina de Cristo* is a defense of Sor Juana's theology. The power and sarcastic tone of its language have brought the letter much attention. However, another fact about the letter has drawn even more attention: the true identity of Sister Serafina. In the title of the letter, Sister Seraphina de Cristo claims to be from the Hieronymite convent, the same convent in which Sor Juana lived. There is, however, no Serafina in the *Book of Religious Professions* from the Hieronymite convent.⁵² This fact, along with the author's stalwart defense of Sor Juana and the similarity of the Sor Juana's signature with that of Sister Seraphina led Elías Trabulse to claim that the letter was written by Sor Juana herself.⁵³ This claim has been refuted by some other major researchers in the field. Antonio Alatorre, Trabulse's colleague at the Colegio de México, disputes the claim because Sister Seraphina's signature, writing style, and style of argumentation do not match those of Sor Juana. Instead, Alatorre and Tenorio speculate that the author could be Juan Ignacio de Castorena y Ursúa, who wrote praise for Sor Juana in the preface to her *Fame and Posthumous Works*.⁵⁴

Regardless of the true identity of Sister Seraphina, the important point to note is that the author wanted to hide behind the façade of a nun. This indicates that the author believed it was a woman's place to defend her fellow spiritual sister. If the sanctity and privacy of the all-female world of the convent was to be invaded by men masquerading as women, then it was up to women to oust the male presence. While the male ecclesiastical authorities demanded ever greater access and control of conventual life, Sister Seraphina advised these men to focus instead on their own affairs. When addressing the aforementioned soldier, Sor Seraphina suggested that "the good soldier should stay in peace, or go to war. . . and see God's judgement against his own."⁵⁵ That is, the soldier should either maintain silence himself or go to war with the erudite Sor Juana and be judged accordingly.

Sister Seraphina maintained that Sor Juana's *Letter Worthy of Athena*, far from being an affront to the Church or the work of a woman overstepping her bounds, was a defense of the foundational teachings of the Church. Sor Juana's *Letter* defended the teachings of the three great

⁵¹ Alatorre and Tenorio, *Serafina y Sor Juana*, 62.

⁵² Serafina de Cristo, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo, 1691*, ed. Elías Trabulse (Toluca: Gobierno del Estado de México, 1996), 25.

⁵³ Serafina de Cristo/Trabulse, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo, 1691*, 25.

⁵⁴ Alatorre and Tenorio, *Serafina y Sor Juana*, 140.

⁵⁵ Serafina de Cristo, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo, 1691*, facsímile ed. and transcription by Elías Trabulse, translation by Alfonso Montelongo, in *Sor Juana & Vieira, Trescientos Años Después*, ed. K. Josu Bijuésca and Pablo A. J. Brescia (Santa Barbara: Center for Portuguese Studies, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 1998), 183-193 at 186.

Church Fathers on God's greatest gift from Vieira's arguments. Therefore, if the charge of stepping out of bounds could be applied aptly to anyone it would be to Father Vieira not to the nun who saw it as her solemn duty to defend her religion.

Sister Seraphina was opposed to the idea that gender should determine an individual's ability to achieve. Though Sor Juana as a woman had no university education, this did not mean that her opinion should be worth any less than that of the soldier. Since Sor Juana's erudition outstripped that of many highly educated men, it was hardly prudent to judge the worth of her views based simply upon the fact that she was a woman and, in accord with Church doctrine, should not teach or interpret theology.

Sor Seraphina continued her attack on the Soldier by firmly rebutting the idea that women should not be permitted to study, interpret, and teach theology. She believed that "what was a legitimate birth of wit's fecundity in writing could never tarnish but greatly honor the Fathers in print."⁵⁶ Because Sor Juana's high level of knowledge was never disputed, Seraphina emphasized the fact that, as long as the author was knowledgeable about the subject, then the work could never be an affront to the Church Fathers. Nevertheless, Sister Seraphina hints at gender's role in producing notable works. By stressing the fact that writing was like the act of childbirth, she placed writing firmly in the woman's domain. This was a reversal of the prevailing thoughts about women's intellectual capabilities. Seraphina then applied the birth metaphor to Vieira's own sermon from 1650 by stating that every part of his sermon was mistaken. "The PARTUM [birth] was mistaken because it was not a legitimate birth, or child of such a great Father. But the main error was in the PATRUM [father]. It was a great mistake to correct the Fathers. . .Whoever's child that sermon may be, if its baptism certificate is missing, it is neither a nobleman nor is it a legitimate child of such a father, or an illegitimate, or an adopted, or even a spiritual one."⁵⁷ Vieira's sermon then was not the product of boundless knowledge like the *Letter Worthy of Athena*; instead, it was an abomination to the foundational teachings of the Church.

At the end of the letter, Sister Seraphina reminded the soldier that he had been put to shame by Sor Juana. Seraphina further emasculated the soldier by pointing out that his intellectual weakness has made him an object of pity. However, this pity was constrained by the fact that "he seems to have *athenagorized* himself."⁵⁸ Here, Sister Seraphina plays with the title that had been given to Sor Juana's *Letter Worthy of Athena*. The Soldier has been destroyed by Athena herself because he attempted to take on a power that was too great for him. One poor soldier was no match for the goddess of wisdom and war, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

⁵⁶ Serafina de Cristo/Trabulse and Montelongo, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo*, 188.

⁵⁷ Serafina de Cristo/Trabulse and Montelongo, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo*, 190.

⁵⁸ Serafina de Cristo/Trabulse and Montelongo, *Carta de Serafina de Cristo*, 190.

Vieira Refuted by the Mother Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz and Defended by the Mother Sister Margarida Ignacia (1731)

After the publication of her *Fame and Posthumous Works* in 1700, “the last reprinting of the three volumes of her work appeared in 1725, and it was not until 1940 that the first modern edition was published.”⁵⁹ Regardless of the fact that Sor Juana’s works were fading out of print and popularity in the early eighteenth century, the last refutation of Sor Juana’s *Letter Worthy of Athena* ostensibly was written by Sister Margarida Ignacia and published in 1731, forty years after the crisis originally erupted and more than eighty years since Vieira’s original Maundy Thursday sermon had been delivered. In doing so, Sister Margarida appears to have the last word on the controversy.

Her treatise, known as *Vieira Refuted*, was a two-hundred-page defense of Vieira written in Portuguese. It has been recently discovered that the author was not Sor Margarida, but Gonçalves Pinheiro, “author of other theological and religious texts”⁶⁰ It is somewhat surprising that, as the Baroque style faded out of fashion, Gonçalves Pinheiro used the same method that his predecessors had used to infiltrate the convent. However, his piece represents a transition of power techniques used by the male ecclesiastical authorities from the indirect shaming of the seventeenth century to direct orders that would be issued by the last quarter of the eighteenth century in the fight over “living in common.”

Like his predecessors, Gonçalves Pinheiro forgot that he had chosen to use a female voice almost as soon as he begins his defense. As Stephanie Kirk has observed, “In ‘her’ prefatory material she alludes to female incapacity for theological debate.”⁶¹ The fact that a nun who was entering a theological debate wrote that it was inappropriate for a nun to write about theology seems unreasonable. Notwithstanding the obvious incongruities, Gonçalves Pinheiro recognized that using a spiritual sister’s name to refute Sor Juana would be more effective than using his male name, for the women who lived in the convent formed a tight-knit community. Censure amongst sisters, then, could be much more searing than the disapproval of a male superior.

Ostensibly, Gonçalves Pinheiro made use of his sister’s name because he wanted readers to believe that a fellow nun had written it; however, he makes a limited effort at playing his role. “Once Gonçalves Pinheiro embarks on this central theological part of the *Apologia*, he will make only the most fleeting of implicit references to his previously employed female pseudonym. He all but abandons the writing persona of Sor Margarida in order to focus on the important scholarly matter at hand”⁶² Though the name, Sor Margarida, was a good entrance into the convent, it

⁵⁹ Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1988), 63.

⁶⁰ Stephanie Kirk, “Sor Margarida Ignacia’s *Apologia a favor do Reverendo P. Antonio Vieyra*: An Eighteenth-Century Reply to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *Atenagorica*,” *Colonial Latin America Review* 21, no. 2 (2012): 267-291 at 269.

⁶¹ Kirk, “Sor Margarida Ignacia’s *Apologia a favor do Reverendo P. Antonio Vieyra*,” 270.

⁶² Kirk, “Sor Margarida Ignacia’s *Apologia a favor do Reverendo P. Antonio Vieyra*,” 274.

was a liability when it comes to debating the issue at hand. The issue at hand proved to be as great a problem for the author as his chosen pseudonym:

Gonçalves Pinheiro's technique in dealing with Vieira's treatment of these patristic texts reveals his cognizance of the damage Sor Juana inflicted on the Portuguese Jesuit with her [Sor Juana's] critique of his hubris, and he tries hard to mitigate Vieira's challenges. His tactic is to represent Vieira as a respectful reader of each Church Father whose exegesis never contravened their opinions, but always simply expanded upon a theory they first proposed or presented their argument from a different but always complementary and complimentary angle.⁶³

Gonçalves Pinheiro, like Sor Juana, realized that it was unwise to dispute the Church Fathers; therefore, he tried to balance the tasks of defending Vieira and explaining what Vieira actually meant so as not to offend other Church officials. Instead of addressing the problems that Vieira's sermon presented, Gonçalves Pinheiro spent the bulk of his document refuting Sor Juana's own argument in the *Letter Worthy of Athena*.

Gonçalves Pinheiro's defense of Vieira was so fervent, at least in part, because both he and Vieira were Jesuits. Stephanie Kirk asserts that Gonçalves Pinheiro felt this defense to be necessary because the Jesuits were under attack. "Although the Society's power was not yet directly under attack in Portugal, threats to their dominance in the Iberian-Atlantic world's religious and intellectual ambit were beginning to make themselves heard and Gonçalves Pinheiro's eighteenth-century defense of a seventeenth-century text can be understood in part as a show of solidarity with the Society of Jesus."⁶⁴ Unfortunately, if this was the author's purpose, then his defense of the Jesuit Vieira did not do the trick. The Jesuits had been expelled from Portugal, Spain, France, and Austria by the end of the eighteenth century.

Conclusion

If the expulsion of the Society of Jesus from Spain in 1767 represented a failure on the part of male ecclesiastical leaders to assert their own will, the fight in New Spain over living in common (*vida común*) in the convents in New Spain was one more such failing. In the late 1760s, male authorities, tired of the way that nuns had been disregarding the Rule, decided to impose living in common on all nuns so that they could return to the way that early church members lived.

The prelates remained adamant in stating that convents allowing nuns to maintain a personal style in daily life lacked austerity and were contravening the vows of profession and the spirit of true Christianity. Ecclesiastic critics began to point to the large number of servants, the constant appeals to the families of nuns for money

⁶³ Kirk, "Sor Margarida Ignacia's *Apologia a favor do Reverendo P. Antonio Vieyra*," 274.

⁶⁴ Kirk, "Sor Margarida Ignacia's *Apologia a favor do Reverendo P. Antonio Vieyra*," 270.

to be spent on the needs of convents, the loss of convent funds, and the quarrels among members of the communities and their superiors leading to appeals to civic authorities.⁶⁵

The decision to impose stricter observance of the Rule of St Augustine against the wishes of the nuns was a stark change when compared to the methods used during Sor Juana's crisis. However, in the eighty years that had elapsed between Sor Juana's crisis and the fight over living in common, it was not just the male ecclesiastical authorities who had changed their tactics. While Sor Juana had only one (presumably) female defender who came to her aid in the crisis before she renounced her studies, the nuns who were to be affected by living in common banded together to prevent any change. On May 19, 1758, Archbishop Francisco Antonio Lorenzana wrote a letter to the abbess of the convent of La Concepción. He asked La Concepción's nuns to deliberate on the reform [living in common] in secret and advise him on the results of the communal vote."⁶⁶ Yet despite of the Archbishop's call to secrecy, the nuns did not keep silent. "They sought solidarity and advice from their sisters in other convents . . . For the first time, we hear the voice of the nuns and we learn that the conventual grapevine was activated for mutual support as they felt themselves under attack" from Church canon and lawyers.⁶⁷ All of the nuns feared that their way of life in the convents would be destroyed if they did not unite with one another.

However, the Archbishop demonstrated that the nuns' approval of the reform was unnecessary for the reform to be instituted. On December 6, 1769, he mandated that all convents would live in common. Practically, this meant that convents could no longer sell private cells to newly-professed nuns. In fact, some private cells would be demolished to make room for the construction of communal areas.

Following in the footsteps of their foremother, Sor Juana, the nuns living in nondiscalced convents wrote against what they perceived as ecclesiastic overreach. "*Vida común* was first fought on legal grounds by Jesús María of Mexico City, a convent with resources to pay for its defense and determination to preserve a lifestyle that had little affinity with the proposed *vida común*. This convent had been under royal patronage since its foundation and it was appropriate that it appealed directly to the king."⁶⁸ The king agreed that the convent's case should be heard in the Fourth Provincial Council in 1771. Though the result of this case was, ultimately, the institution of the living in common reforms, the sisters won a victory, albeit small. As a sign of recognition of the inconvenience of instituting *vida común*, the Church leadership agreed that the reforms would be instituted piecemeal. This bought the nuns time.

⁶⁵ Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 278.

⁶⁶ Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 283.

⁶⁷ Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 283.

⁶⁸ Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 283.

The sisters maintained that “nothing in the Rules and Constitutions of their orders forbade their style of life, which had been examined and approved or corrected by previous prelates throughout time.”⁶⁹ In the same way, Sor Juana had defended herself from her confessor’s attacks on her writing, “But who has forbidden women from private and individual study? Does learning threaten rather than promote salvation?”⁷⁰ Both Sor Juana and her predecessors claimed that these questions had been answered in the long historical trajectory of the Church itself. If Saint Catherine and Saint Ambrose had found salvation even as they were educated, then so, too, could Sor Juana, regardless of the opinion of Father Núñez. In the same way, the nuns recognized that if their lifestyle had been approved since its foundation, then any attempt to force a change that they did not want was arbitrary.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the nuns had won the struggle through the continued resistance against implementing the prescribed changes. Though the changes were required by Pastoral Letter and by direction from the king (1774), the implementation never occurred. The rolls of the convents still showed large numbers of slaves, servants, and girls who were supposed to have been expelled. The convents that had been designed with the daughters of the upper class in mind did not change their lifestyle or ‘wasteful’ spending.

The resistance to living in common in the eighteenth century mirrored Sor Juana’s own crisis in the seventeenth century. But whereas the struggle against living in common ultimately ended in success for the sisters, it would be difficult to describe Sor Juana’s end in the same manner. Ultimately, Sor Juana had to give in to the calls to end her studies and writing because she did not have a network of other nuns to shield her from the onslaught. Sor Juana’s struggle for the right to self-determination for herself and for women more generally may have provided the nuns of the eighteenth century with a muse to emulate when planning how they would resist the male encroachment on their sacred female space. And that would be a successful conclusion to Sor Juana’s own crisis.

⁶⁹ Lavrin, *Brides of Christ*, 283.

⁷⁰ Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Carta de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz a Su Confesor: Autodefensa Espiritual*, in *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Works*, ed. and trans. Edith Grossman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2106), 144-152 at 148.

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