

Gender and Freedom to pursue one's Aspirations

When one reads accounts of the lives of Spanish women during the seventeenth century one is bombarded with accounts of restrictions. The restrictions of women during these times are certainly the focus of many papers written about this time period. Silvia Marina quotes legal handbooks as saying “women... [were] all presumed incapable of many activities...they were deemed weaker in body, mind, and character.” Also, she quotes, “The woman is not of as high a status or as good a condition of the man.”¹ In listing the activities from which women were excluded she lists banishment from taking the role of “judges, lawyers, priests...” and they could not “be guardians or adopt children as they pleased...”² So great was the pressure for women to remain in the home that Laura Lewis, in her describing women of lower economic status, states, “those women compelled by economic circumstances to be on the ‘outside’ ...lost honor and value”. However, I found that, with a bit of cunning, women **could** undermine the system which was designed to keep them subservient to men. That is, by manipulation of the system women could gain the freedom to pursue their dreams by, paradoxically, appearing to be obeying the rules imposed upon their sex. The two women who best exemplify this undermining of the rules also happen to be extremely famous for having done so extremely successfully. The first is Catalina de Erauso, known by some as the Lieutenant Nun because, by disguising herself as a man, she served in the army in the New World (among other things). The second woman to successfully pursue her dreams through manipulation was Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. She was a very intelligent young lady who was able to use the life of a nun to pursue her intellectual studies.

¹ “The Women of Mexico City, 1790-1857” Silvia Marnia Arrom (p56)

² Arrom (p58)

Our first woman, Catalina de Erauso, made an important realization early in her life. She realized that men were able to do as they wished and women were to silently obey the wishes of men. At the age of four Catalina was sent into a convent with the intention that she would live out her life in the convent. As Scott mentions, "In Catalina's day, and indeed in her own family, 'the men served the king; the women entered religion.'"³ When she reached the fifteen years of age she realized that she would be trapped in the monastery if she did not escape as soon as possible. Catalina wanted to experience the world outside of the convent. She did realize, however, how much attention a woman roving the country-side would attract. After all, women at this time in history were supposed to be in the home or accompanied by men when they traveled. Therefore, as Scott observes, "Aware of the restrictions that her gender imposed on her life, she did not try to change the inequity between the sexes. Instead she chose to change herself."⁴ Catalina realized that she was incapable of changing the system that guided her world. Therefore she decided to use it for her benefit. Men were allowed to roam the world as they pleased and nearly able to do whatever they wished. She became a man in order to escape the constraints of a woman.

While, as a woman, she would have been restricted to life in the home (if not the convent), as a man she was able to play many roles. Being a man also afforded her many advantages and benefits. For example, while in the town of Trujillo she receives two slaves and a cook to prepare her meals. The person she was working for even left her in charge of his shop where she was in charge of selling objects, collecting money as

³ "Mothers of the Word" Nina M. Scott (p18)

⁴ Scott (p19)

payment, and determining who was able to buy on credit.⁵ These responsibilities would never have been laid upon a woman since they were considered to be mentally inferior. A woman would not have the capacity to do the mathematics necessary to effectively run a shop, much less be able to determine who was abusing their credit. Later she is working in Lima for another shopkeeper earning six hundred pesos a year.⁶ A woman would never be trusted with so much money for economic freedom would have meant that she wouldn't have to depend upon her husband or other male figure. Eventually she finds herself in the Army in Chile. This is, blatantly, not a place for women. Yet Catalina joins the ranks of other men in battle. Not only did she fight, but, according to her own account, her performance was rather exemplary. We read, "Seeing them make off with it [the standard], I and two other mounted soldiers went after them through a great multitude, charging and killing and being wounded in turn. Soon one of the three fell dead. The two of us kept on, and we got to the standard, but a lance thrust felled my companion. I, with a bad wound in one leg, killed the cacique who had it in his possession, took the standard away and spurred my horse, charging, killing, and wounding indiscriminately;"⁷

Such manly behavior is not only unacceptable for women to perform, but even when women must perform in such a manner for simple survival, the rule-breaking must be excused. For Example, Doña Isabel de Guevara was part of an expedition in the early days of conquest of the New World. When her exploration group suffered a fate similar to the early years Jamestown in Virginia, the men were left extremely weak and the women had to take on the tasks of men. Part of her description reads, "...the women

⁵ Scott (p39)

⁶ Scott (p42)

⁷ Scott (p42)

took all the labors on board...they all worked at handling the sails and steering the ship, taking soundings at the bow and taking over the oar from a soldier unable to row...and encouraging the sailors not to lose heart; this was men's work, and in truth the women were not rewarded for it..."⁸ Here we see that even though it was **necessary** for the women to take on the tasks of men, that the women still needed to virtually ask for forgiveness for having turned the tables. Catalina, as a man, did not have to make these excuses. In fact, it is expected that she would do all that she could to protect her current city of residence if it was under attack.

Some historians have mentioned that Catalina may have been homosexual. If this is the case then it serves as yet another example of how she was able to use her male identity to break the rules and do what would otherwise have been considered taboo. She mentions two accounts of such activity. The first occurs while she is in Lima. She is told to find work somewhere else when her boss suspects her of ill play with one of his nieces. Catalina is fired from another job in Chile because she is caught cavorting with her brother's mistress.⁹ These two men believe her to be man and therefore feel that she is interacting with these women in a sexual manner. As a man she is simply relieved of her job and sent away to find work elsewhere. As a woman she may have been reported to the church and possibly excommunicated. Additionally, as a *puta* she would have lost her legal rights as a woman since these legal rights were only afforded to respectable women.

The next woman that I would like to examine is remarkable, not only in her own right, but also when her method of manipulating the system is juxtaposed with Catalina

⁸ Scott (p13)

⁹ Scott (p40 & 42)

de Erauso. Sor Juana's method of escape was, ironically, to join a convent. She had been blessed, or cursed as it was in this time period, with an insatiable curiosity about the world around her and an immense intelligence. In her letter to the Bishop, whose pen-name in a previous correspondence was Sor Filotea, she states, "I learned to read in such a short time that I already knew how by the time my mother heard of it."¹⁰ When she was old enough she requested that her mother disguise her as a man so that she would be able to attend college in Mexico City. Her request was not granted and she was forced to teach herself. She even opposed marriage because she felt that her husband would ask her to do other tasks which would take away from time that she could spend in study.¹¹ Her situation thus presented her with two problems. Primarily, she was learning – an activity considered seditious and dangerous in the seventeenth century. Sor Juana even acknowledges this sentiment with her words, "He [God] knows that I have prayed that He snuff out the light of my intellect, leaving only enough to keep His Law. For more than that is too much, some would say, in a woman; and there are even those who say it is harmful."¹² Indeed, as we shall see a learned woman would be able to refute the status quo with intelligent arguments. These arguments might excite enough other people to overthrow the system into one of chaos where women were equal to men. This was obviously something that the male-dominated society did not want to occur. The second problem was her aversion to marriage. Women were supposed to be under the authority of some male. If she was not married there was no male to supervise her activities. Sor Juana therefore acted upon the only option which she had – she joined a convent. By

¹⁰ "The Answer" by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (p49)

¹¹ Powell (p51)

¹² Powell (p47)

becoming a nun, and therefore inherently agreeing to remain celibate for as long as she was in God's service, she was able to avoid marriage.

Nuns were also required to learn theology and Sor Juana hoped to be able to sneak in some of her own secular learning while she was in the convent. This she was able to do quite effectively as is evidenced by her constant quoting of various philosophers of whom the average woman would have been ignorant of. In fact, she is able to make a very convincing case as to why she should be learning secular subjects. The basis of her argument is that she will be able to be a better catholic through her studies. She states, rather eloquently, "Without Logic, how should I know the general and specific methods by which Holy Scripture is written? Without Rhetoric, how should I understand its figures, tropes, and locutions? Or how, without Physics or Natural Science, understand all the questions that naturally arise concerning the varied natures of those animals offered in sacrifice, in which a great many things already made manifest are symbolized, and many more besides? How should I know whether Saul's cure at the sound of David's harp was owing to a virtue and power that is natural in Music or owing, instead, to a supernatural power that God saw fit to bestow on David? How without Arithmetic might one understand all those mysterious reckonings of years and day sand months and hours and weeks that are found in Daniel and elsewhere, which can be comprehended only by knowing the natures, concordances, and properties of numbers? Without Geometry, how could we take measure of the Holy Ark of the Covenant or the Holy City of Jerusalem, each of whose mysterious measurements forms a perfect cube uniting their dimensions, and each displaying that most marvelous distribution of the proportions of every part? Without the science of Architecture, how understand the

mighty Temple of Solomon - where God Himself was the Draftsman who set forth His arrangement and plan, and the Wise King was but the overseer who carried it out; where there was no foundation without its mystery, nor column without its symbol, nor cornice without its allusion, nor architrave without its meaning, and likewise for every other part, so that even the very least fillet served not only for the support and enhancement of Art, but the symbolize greater things? How, without a thorough knowledge of the order and divisions by which History is composed, is one to understand the Historical Books - as in those summaries, for example, which often postpone in the narration what happened first in fact? How, without command of the two branches of Law, should one understand the Books of Law?... Well then, and without being expert in Music, how might one understand those musical intervals and their perfections that occur in a great many passages - especially in Abraham's petitions to God on behalf of the Cities, beseeching God to spare them if there were found fifty righteous people within? And the number fifty Abraham reduced to forty-five, which is sesquinal [10 to 9] or like the interval from mi to re; this in turn he reduced to forty, which is the sesquioctave [9 to 8] or like the interval from re to mi; thence he went down to thirty which is sesquitercia, or the interval of the diatessaron [the perfect fourth]; thence to twenty, the sesquialtera or the diapente [the fifth]; thence to ten, the duple, which is the diapason [the interval and consonance of the octave]; and because there are no more harmonic intervals, Abraham went no further. How could all this be understood without knowledge of Music? ..."¹³

Her mastery of theological and secular concepts to such a level that she can intertwine them in the way that she does is, all by itself, an argument as to why women (especially nuns) should be well learned. Thus she is able to prove that, if a nun's top objective is

¹³ Powell (p53,55)

indeed getting as close to God as possible, nuns should study all the other subjects as earnestly as the Bible.

Sor Juana even went so far as to use her time in the convent to subvert the roles of men and women even further. On a small scale she had power over men through the ability to choose her confessor. Therefore, if she found that the confessor did not meet her standards she could fire him, as it were, from the job of confessing her. She did indeed do this very thing. Here men are made to please women; an obvious overturning of gender roles. More powerfully, however, she is able to suggest that something is wrong with the status quo through her own study of the Bible, which was considered, of course, the authority on how one should live. She mentions the great women of the Bible.¹⁴ Deborah, one of the women she mentions, led the Israelites into battle. Ester is famous for having saved the Jews from genocide by appealing to the king. Rehab was a prostitute who was saved from death for helping the Hebrew spies into the enemy city of Jericho. The fact that these women were appointed by God to such important roles suggested that something was wrong with the way that the Spaniards were imposing gender roles in the seventeenth century. She uses her study of the theology to refute yet another mandate from men. They were using Paul's verse stating that "women should keep silent in the churches" as a way to keep women from having important roles in the church. Juana does some digging and finds out that Paul was describing a certain group of women who were being disruptive during masses. He does not mean, she interprets, that women should be silenced. Rather, they should refrain from chatting during mass.¹⁵

¹⁴ Powell (p77)

¹⁵ Powell (p89 & 91)

Thus we see how two women were able to use mechanisms built into system in order to keep themselves from being subjugated by it. Of course one must make two key realizations. Obviously all women did not use the system in such a manipulative manner. Were such subversion to have taken place the entire system would have collapsed. If everyone is an exception to the rule, then of what use are rules? However, one cannot, in an attempted to discredit this essay by claiming that only two women have been offered up as examples, be too naïve as to think that Sor Juana and Catalina were the only two to take advantage of such loopholes. The loopholes were available to whoever was cunning enough to use them. The key to such manipulation was to appear to be conforming to the system all the while undermining it. Catalina was able to achieve this by becoming a man. As a man she was free to do what she wished. As long as all others believed her to be a man, her actions were consistent with what was expected of her. In the same sense Sor Juana did not decide to live her life as a single woman out in public. To do so would have been too outwardly subversive. Instead she avoided marriage by appearing to be turning to God. An intense desire to go beyond their boundaries and the realization that they would be vehemently opposed if they were to have so obviously stepped out of the cages in which their gender placed them allowed these women to secretly pursue their aspirations with considerably fewer impediments than they might have otherwise faced.