

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE Saints & Sinners

Juana Ines de la Cruz (1648-1695)

1. **World, in hounding me, what do you gain?**

How can it harm you if I choose, astutely,
Rather to stock my mind with things of beauty,
Than waste its stock on every beauty's claim?
Costliness and wealth bring me no pleasure;
The only happiness I care to find
Derives from setting treasure in my mind,
And not from mind that's set on winning treasure.
I prize no comeliness. All fair things pay
To time the victor, their appointed fee
And treasure cheats even the practiced eye.
Mine is better and the truer way:
To leave the vanities of life aside,
Not throw my life away on vanity.

#28, in *A Sor Juana Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1988) 95-97

Try to imagine the 17th century society around Juana Ines de la Cruz. What do you think people had planned for her life? What are the tensions that Juana Ines is experiencing? What choices is she making? Where have your desires or choices come into conflict with what others expected of you? What could you learn from Juana Ines?



2. **In the opinion of the very people who slander me for writing,** I am under no obligation to be learned nor do I possess the capacity never to err...In truth I have never written except when pressured and forced to and then only to please others and even then not only without enjoyment but with actual repugnance because I have never thought of myself as possessing the natural intelligence and educational background required of a writer...Beyond a handful of superficial sophistries? Let such things be left to those who understand them; I want no trouble with the Holy Office. I am ignorant and I shudder to think that I might utter some disreputable proposition or distort the proper understanding of some passage or other. My purpose in studying is not to write, much less to teach (this would be overbearing pride in my case), but simply to see whether studying makes me less ignorant. This is my reply and these are my feelings.

...God, in His goodness, has favored me with a great love of the truth...From my first glimmers of reason, my inclination to letters was of such power and vehemence that neither the reprimands of others—and I have received many—nor my own considerations—and there have been not a few of these—have succeeded in making me abandon this natural impulse which God has implanted in me—only His Majesty knows why and wherefore and His Majesty also knows that I have prayed to Him to extinguish the light of my mind, only leaving sufficient to keep His Law, since any more is overmuch, so some say, in a woman, and there are even those who say it is harmful. His Majesty also knows that, not succeeding in this, I have tried to inter my name along with my mind and sacrifice it to Him alone who gave it to me; and that this was precisely my motivation in taking the veil, even though the exercises and shared life which a community entails were repellant to the independence and tranquility which my inclination to study needed. And once in the community, the Lord God knows...how hard I tried to conceal my name....

I became a nun because, although I knew that that way of life involved much that was repellent to my nature—I refer to its incidental, not its central aspects—nevertheless, given my total disinclination to marriage, it was the least unreasonable and most becoming choice I could make to assure my ardently desired salvation...by the grace of God [I] entered upon the life I now pursue so unworthily. I thought I was escaping from myself, but, alas for me, I had brought myself along. In this propensity I brought my

greatest enemy, given me by Heaven whether as a boon or a punishment I cannot decide, for, far from dying out or being hindered by all the exercises religion entails, it exploded like gunpowder. *Privatio est causa appetitus* [Privation arouses the appetite] had its confirmation in me....I will say that I tried to uplift my study as much as I could and direct it to serving Him, since the goal I aspired to was the study of theology.

from "Reply to Sor Philothea" in *A Sor Juana Anthology*, translated by Alan S. Trueblood (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1988) 209-212

Is there a line or a phrase that caught your attention? Read it out loud now.

How does Juana Ines understand her calling?

What words would Juana Ines use to describe the character of God? God's involvement in her life?

She writes, "Let such things be left to those who understand them; I want no trouble with the Holy Office." During her time the Spanish Inquisition was active in Mexico. What do imagine she means by "trouble"?

What do you do with a gift that is given by God—but is denied in life? Have you ever seen in this in anyone?



3. On the feast day of St. Catherine of Alexandria (3rd c. Egypt)
Oaxaca, 1691, Eleventh Villancicio {church carol, anthem}

There was once a girl—you'll see who I mean—
Whose years had reached the age of eighteen.
If you'd just hush up, my meaning you'd glean.
This girl (don't ask how 'cause here words fail)
Knew a lot, so they say, though she was female.
If you'd just hush up, you'd hear my tale.
Now people are always saying...you know...that all girls can do is spin and sew. If
you'd just hush up and not fuss so.
But her, she could argue wit grown men and win, so kids couldn't lick her to save
their skin. If you'd just hush up and not butt in.

The makings of her sainthood was in her, they say; even knowing so much didn't get in her way.

If you'd just hush up and let me say.

Now when word reached old Nick, who don't shut an eye, she's so holy and smart he made like he'd die.

If you'd just hush up, I'll tell you why.

Because if there's one thing drives the Devil up a tree, it's hearing of a woman who's smarter than he.

If you'd just hush up and let me be.

So what does he do? Goes and urges a King to tempt her in her faith and demand she give in.

If you'd just keep still and not butt in.

His terrible threats didn't make a dent: she would sooner die than ever relent.

If you'd just hush up and let me end. No more questions now 'cause all I can say

Is that Catherine will live forever and a day. You needn't hush up, I've had my say.

from *A Sor Juana Anthology*, translated by Alan S. Trueblood (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1988) 143-145

What lessons does Juana Ines take from the life of Saint Catherine?

4. So then, un-maker of all my dear illusions, now you have arrived here at the very last!

and since you are here in your own person, I know for certain that the end has come to pass.

You have compelled my loss of my everything, and that is not all either – I now believe
the price I paid for receiving this advisement could even be considered somewhat cheap.

No longer now will you go envying love –those flattering and beguiling joys no longer yours
this being a rigorous lesson in disabusement and the risk of further self-deceptions being slight.

I can now give up all my watching and waiting, and this serves me as a secure consolation:

I find it to be in addition an alleviation to the need of having to seek remediation.

In this same way, and in this very loss I have found here something of a palliation.

One finds that when the treasure has been forfeit, the fear of forfeiture is likewise lost.

Having been left with nothing left to lose I am now in a calmer situation:

the traveler finding herself already denuded has no more fear of finding herself accosted.
But neither does this self-same liberty serve me as any reliable advantage
and it should soon prove to be a detriment if I should take it for yet another acquisition.
I no longer need the need for carefulness, and of assets which tend to be at best uncertain:
and I am determined that even this soul's disposition be considered only as yet another dispossession.
I no longer need the need for carefulness, and of assets which tend to be at best uncertain:
and I am determined that even this soul's disposition be considered only as yet another dispossession.

Translation Dia Tsung <https://theinkbrain.wordpress.com/2011/09/02/the-loss-of-illusions-by-juana-ines-de-la-cruz-2/>

What emotions come through in this passage?

What illusions do you think Juana Ines has lost here near the end of her life?

What role has loss played in your own life?

Do you identify with Juana Ines de la Cruz? How do you connect with her?

Read about Juana Ines de la Cruz in *Vintage Saints and Sinners* by Karen Wright Marsh (IVP, 2018)

More free small group readings and guides at www.karenwrightmarsh.com

