Based on a True Story

Latin American History at the Movies

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For Nathaniel,

who has his own ideas

about the movies

Minta, Stephen. *Aguirre: The Re-creation of a Sixteenth-Century Journey across South America*. New York: Henry Holt, 1994. A modern travelogue retracing the route of the Ursúa-Aguirre expedition interspersed with historical rumination and commentary on the events of the earlier trip, perpetuating the consensus that Aguirre was deranged and that his letter to Philip II "is not the work of a rational mind" (210).

Otero Silva, Miguel. *Lope de Aguirre, Principe de la Libertad*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979. Novelized version of the story by a distinguished Venezuelan writer.

CHAPTER FOUR

I, the Worst of All
The Literary Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Susan E. Ramírez

Yo, la Peor de Todas *(1990), or* I, the Worst of All*; produced by Gilbert Marouani and Lita Stantic; directed by María Luisa Bemberg; written by María Luisa Bemberg and Antonio Larreta based on* Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith *by Octavio Paz; color; 105 minutes; GEA Cinematográfica. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Assumpta Serna), the famous seventeenth-century Mexican nun, writes poetry and plays under the patronage of the viceroy (Hector Alterio) and his wife (Dominique Sanda) until they are recalled to Spain. Then a misogynistic archbishop tries to restrict Sor Juana's activities to more humble and traditionally religious pursuits.*

Despite a growing number of books and articles on her life and times, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz remains an enigma in many respects. Assiduous searches by scholars in archives and libraries all over the world have been unable to find many sources on her life other than those that she herself wrote. And many of these are poems and plays and other literary works which, although they reflect her life and concerns, do not and were not meant to provide facts on or explain her existence. Nevertheless, what remains of her work (because much of it has been lost) allows her to retain much of the power of description, even centuries after her premature death from the plague in 1695. Her writings provide the bare outlines of a self-portrait and representation. Hence, it is largely

her own creation that historians, poets, filmmakers, and the many others interested in this seventeenth-century woman and nun have attempted to synthesize and analyze.

The interpretation of Argentine director María Luisa Bemberg follows closely the Mexican Octavio Paz's masterful biography, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith.*[1] Each leaves some of the questions about Sor Juana's life unresolved. Both show her to have been a woman of strength who chose the cloistered life of a convent to gain the freedom to pursue her art. She is shown as a forceful, willful, intelligent, even gifted individual who could not escape the political, economic, and social conjuncture that surrounded her. Bemberg carefully reconstructs these larger circumstances, especially the conflicts between the church and the state, to explain the trajectory of her singular and exemplary life.

Juana Inés

Bemberg's story focuses on Sor Juana's life during the viceregal reign of the marquis de la Laguna (1680–1686), during which she wrote some of her most memorable work, and the increasingly sad and crisis-ridden years that followed his return to Spain. The film opens with a brief, darkly shadowed scene in which a new viceroy toasts the archbishop. The two promise to save New Spain from license and irreligiosity by governing together. We then see the sunny courtyard of the Convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City, where nuns and novices are playing and singing. Inside her contrastingly quiet cell, Sor Juana, surrounded by books, scientific instruments, and oddities, is busy at her desk. Thus, we encounter an adult Sor Juana, already a professed nun, writing for an audience.

About her early childhood we know very little. Throughout the film and not necessarily in chronological order, using flashbacks and other devices, Bemberg provides the viewer with the salient points in young Juana Inés's life. Late in the film, Bemberg reminds viewers of her illegitimate birth as Juana Ramírez or Juana Ramírez de Asbaje in Chimalhuacán, in the scene set in 1688 in which she tries to find out who her father was as her mother (Isabel Ramírez de Santilla) lays dying. This interpretation is consistent with Paz's belief that this girl never knew her father, who was from Vizcaya (Spain) and may have been the local priest. Based on a baptismal record and Isabel Ramírez's will, Paz believes that Juana Inés was one of six illegitimate children whom her mother bore:

Surrounded by her books and other possessions, Sor Juana writes at her desk in the privacy of her room.

the first three by Pedro Manuel de Asbaje y Vargas Machuca and the last three by Captain Diego Ruiz Lozano. Juana Inés was the youngest of the first set of children. Given these origins, she always relied on and lived with her maternal relations.

It was there in Chimalhuacán that, as Juana says in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, she learned to read when she was three years old with the help of a teacher of an older sister.[2] By age six or seven, by her own account, she could read and write. Then it occurred to her to ask her mother to send her to the university. Because the seventeenth-century university was open only to males, she promised to dress as a man. When the response was negative, Juana consoled herself by reading and studying in the library of her maternal grandfather on the Hacienda Panoayán. When her grandfather died in 1656, eight-year-old Juana was sent to Mexico City to live with a maternal aunt, Doña María Ramírez, and her wealthy husband, Juan de Mata.

In her aunt's home, she learned Latin from Martín de Olivas and developed into a lovely young lady. Perhaps because her relatives decided that they did not want the responsibility for the ultimate fate of a pretty, virginal, and wayward relative or because the

court might give her a better context for developing herself, her relatives presented her to the just-arrived Doña Leonor Carreto, the marquise de Mancera, who accepted Juana Inés as a favored lady-in-waiting.

The court of Viceroy Antonio Sebastián de Toledo, the marquis de Mancera, must have been stimulating to a precocious adolescent such as Juana Inés. Her four years there left a lasting impression on her. The marquise was ingenious, vivacious, and, like her husband, a lover of pomp and pageantry. The Manceras were known for their prodigality: they spent lavishly, arrived late to Mass, and loved literature. Undoubtedly, the opportunities to attend receptions, parties, and dances and to see processions and ceremonies contributed to Juana Inés's reputed liveliness, joviality, narcissism, and flirtatious nature.

However, while at court she also became known for her learning. At one point the marquis assembled forty professors, professionals, and other learned men, among them theologians, writers, philosophers, mathematicians, historians, and poets, to test her knowledge. As Bemberg's film shows, Juana Inés answered the questions of this scholarly assemblage with aplomb and to the satisfaction and even astonishment of those present.

The young and gifted Juana Ramírez examines a botanical specimen as her erudition is tested by a panel of learned men.

It is after this point in her life, in 1667, that she first tried the religious life. At age nineteen she became a novice at the Convent of San José de las Carmelitas Descalzas.[3] The order proved too severe for Juana Inés and she abandoned this attempt soon after she entered. A year and one-half later she professed at the Convent of San Jerónimo, known for the laxity of its discipline. At age twenty-one, in 1669, she took her final vows.

The Convent of San Jerónimo, in contrast to that of San José, was a very good choice for Juana Inés. Unlike many other convents in Mexico at the time, the rule at San Jerónimo was often observed more in the breach. In San Jerónimo, the sisters followed a "private life." Instead of living and eating together communally, each nun lived separately in her own cell where she took meals, worked, prayed, and received other nuns. Sor Juana's cell, or apartment, was a duplex with one large room divided into bedroom and study, another that served as salon and library, a bath, and a kitchen. Where poverty was the rule at other convents, in San Jerónimo nuns had their own possessions. Sor Juana was able to maintain a library of some four thousand volumes,[4] reputed to be the largest in New Spain at the time. Nearby, she kept a disparate array of prized objects such as her telescope, astrolabe, obsidian mirror, and feather headdress. Although the sisters were forbidden to accept gifts, Sor Juana received many presents, especially from the viceroy's wife.

The convent, furthermore, was known as a center of culture and learning. It was celebrated for its classes in music, dance, and theater. Sor Juana was a natural to assume the task of music mistress. Over the years she wrote songs and lyrics for dances and participated in musicals and plays. We see one of these theatrical events in the opening scenes of the motion picture.

The only rule that was observed was that of cloister, which restricted the visits of friends and acquaintances and prohibited nuns from leaving the convent except under extraordinary conditions, such as the death of a mother.[5] When visitors were permitted, they were usually separated from the sisters by wooden bars. Viceroys and their followers visited often. The Manceras often heard Vesper prayers in the chapel and then went to the parlor to talk with Sor Juana. They were joined by other clerics and literary people for a lively exchange and debate. The nuns also received guests in the sacristy, usually with their faces uncovered. In San Jerónimo, says Paz, there was conversation, debate, poetry recitals, and musical performances—both secular and sacred.

Sor Juana

The main focus of the film is a conflict between church and state and the political intrigues and personal animosities that eventually catch Sor Juana in their webs, defeat her passion for literature, and speed the end of her life. The script of the movie starts sometime after November 1680, emphasizing the years that New Spain was governed by Viceroy don Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, the third marquis de la Laguna and the younger brother of the eighth duke of Medinaceli—that is, a member of the highest nobility of Spain.[6] He is accompanied by his wife, the *virreina*, also a well-born lady, María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, the condesa de Paredes. Both loved the arts, poetry, theater, and music. Even before the new viceroy arrived, he had heard of Sor Juana, whom he called the *decíma musa* (the tenth Muse), an allusion to the nine sister goddesses in Greek mythology who presided over song, poetry, and the arts and sciences.

According to the movie, after don Tomás's arrival and at the performance of one of Sor Juana's plays at the convent, the delighted viceroy and his wife, although acknowledging that it was "crazy" for a woman to want to think and write, decide to adopt

Sor Juana directs a performance of her own play to entertain the new viceroy and his wife.

her. In reality, Sor Juana met the new viceroy as the result of a commission from the town council to write a poem for one of the arches erected to honor him upon his arrival in late 1680. Nevertheless, the outcome was the same; she would work thereafter under his patronage and favor. This episode initiates one of the most fecund times in her literary life, during which she composed the poems *El divino narciso* and *Primero sueño*. A foreshadowing that the proverbial storm clouds were already gathering around her is the attitude of the archbishop of Mexico, Francisco de Aguiar y Seixas, who clearly does not share the viceroy's delight, as he mumbles something about the convent as bordello. The archbishop leaves already thinking of revenge.

In the scenes that follow, we see the life of Sor Juana up close. Unlike a woman living the stereotypical life of a nun, Sor Juana spends her days thinking, reading (sometimes books prohibited by the Inquisition), and writing. (At this time, she was working on her famous *Primero sueño*.) She watches the heavens through her telescope, plucks her lyre, and splashes on perfume and gazes into a mirror to adjust her veil and jewelry before receiving visitors, an allusion to her vanity and narcissism.

One of her most frequent visitors (according to Bemberg) is the *virreina*. In a long conversation in an early scene, the two discuss their lives. Sor Juana lists the advantages of her chosen path. The convent allows her to write and think. In response to a question about loneliness, she says that she has been alone since she was a child—a reference undoubtedly to her early life: to an absent father, to her dead grandfather, and to a mother and aunt who sent her away. The *virreina* sees the parallels with her own life; both are locked in by either a rule (of the convent) or a protocol (of the diplomat's wife). Both have a circumscribed world. They become the best of friends. The *virreina* thereafter comes frequently to Sor Juana's cell. They talk of books. They acknowledge the potential for problems with the Holy Inquisition because of the "dangerous" volumes that Sor Juana reads by Gassendi, Kircher, Kepler, Copernicus, and Descartes. The *virreina* brings her gifts in return for her laudatory poems and admires Sor Juana's "children": her telescope, sundial, astrolabe, and magnets.

Another frequent visitor is her confessor, the Jesuit father Antonio Núñez de Miranda. He was a theologian, philosopher, professor, preacher, and instrument of the Inquisition. He served as confessor to viceroys and as spiritual director to nuns. Bemberg

accepts his reputation for having convinced or influenced Juana Inés to profess thirteen years earlier, going so far as to arrange for don Pedro Velásquez de la Cadena to pay her 3,000-peso dowry.[7] We see him rebuking Sor Juana for her vanities. She writes praises for viceregal authorities. He asks, "What about God?"

In contrast to these light and happier scenes are those that allude to the growing adversity that Bemberg inserts, ever more often, as the film progresses in dark and muted colors. Already, in one of the first scenes, we know that Mother Nature is not cooperating. In the same scene in which the abbess announces the first visit of the viceroy de la Laguna to the convent, we are told that there is a drought in Mexico that makes the convent's rent collections slow and difficult. The nuns are admonished to work harder.

The archbishop reappears complaining about the lax rule in the convent. He is a fanatically religious man who hates women. So fearful of temptation is he that he will not sit at a table with one. The archbishop begins meddling with the upcoming secret elections for the new abbess. He wants a stricter nun to govern the sisters, even if it means using influence and promises to win the needed additional votes. Subsequently, a scene shows nuns clandestinely copying the *Primero sueño* in the depths of the night and the members of a divided Inquisition tribunal discussing its merits and demerits. But as long as the marquis de la Laguna rules Mexico, Sor Juana and her creations are safe. Orders to give up some books go nowhere as long as the *virreina* is at Sor Juana's side.

Once Medinaceli is recalled and leaves Mexico at the end of 1688, the conjuncture of forces and the vicissitudes of nature combine to doom Sor Juana and the products of her quill pen.[8] Paz reminds us, "After María Luisa and her husband left, Sor Juana must have felt abandoned. To live without protectors in a world that was a web of alliances, friendships and reciprocal favors was like being in deep water without a lifebuoy to cling to."[9]

Perhaps in seeking to please another protector, the bishop of Puebla, Sor Juana makes a fatal mistake. Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the bishop of Puebla, had a personal grudge against the archbishop of Mexico and had asked Sor Juana to write a critique of a sermon by one of the archbishop's favorite Portuguese theologians. This writer, Father Antonio Vieyra, had refuted the opinions of three saints (Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Chrysostom) about Christ in his last days. Bemberg's film suggests that Sor Juana accepted the assignment to show her erudition in a field that was

As religious pressure to obey increases, Sor Juana learns that her patrons must return to Spain.

the exclusive preserve of men, and that she ignored repeated warnings about the power of the Inquisition in New Spain.[10] In Bemberg's film, Sor Juana accepts the challenge despite stories of Spanish autos-da-fé in which hundreds were burned at the stake to amuse the populace and take people's minds off larger socioeconomic problems. Furthermore, Bemberg suggests that Sor Juana could not resist the opportunity to attack a man who hated women, who had initiated an era of austerity and prohibited friends' visits to the convent parlor, and who damned public spectacles such as plays, bullfights, and cockfights. Paz suggests that Sor Juana regarded the archbishop with a mixture of fear and repugnance. She may have thought that his rejection of the theater and poetry was a condemnation of her life and work. In this one instance, Sor Juana's pride in her accomplishments and her abilities led her to abandon her heretofore extreme prudence and reserve when it came to the Inquisition and the power of the church—as epitomized by the archbishop of Mexico.

Although declared not heretical, Sor Juana's critique was condemned in Mexico. Dorothy Schons explains why: the Jesuits were all powerful. They were practically in control of the Inquisition. Father Vieyra was a Jesuit, and it was thought that the critique was an attack on that order. To attack Vieyra or the order was to attack Aguiar y Seixas himself. Worse, when confronted by the archbishop and asked for the name of the person behind the critique, she responded with the pseudonym Sor Filotea (really the bishop of Puebla, Fernández de Santa Cruz) under which it was published. Paz sums up the situation, saying that "Sor Juana intervened in the quarrel between two powerful Princes of the Roman Church and was destroyed in the process."[11] Only a few months later, she dictated another treatise (*Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, March 1, 1691) to defend the right to study and write.[12]

In the end, her confessor not only did not defend her but also abandoned her. So did the cautious Fernández de Santa Cruz, an origin of her troubles. Envy, fear, hatred of women, and suspicion prevailed under the guise of orthodoxy.

Meanwhile, Mexico was afflicted by unceasing rains, from the summer of 1691 into 1692, and disease, both of which were seen as a sign of God's condemnation of the immorality of society. Social upheaval broke out in June 1692 in Mexico City, where Indians rioted and attacked the viceregal palace. Trouble erupted too in

Tlaxcala, Guadalajara, and elsewhere. Processions and prayers did little to assuage the scarcity of provisions that continued into 1693.

At this point, Bemberg makes Sor Juana look worn and aged (notice that she wears spectacles for the first time). Paz says that she felt culpable. Subsequently, we see her washing floors in the medical ward. Such self-sacrifice in the service of God brought the peripatetic confessor back to her side. Her renunciation of the material world and her self and her art began. Paz believes that she had lost her faith in herself. With no protectors, she needed to find refuge. The only option in such a situation was one of submission. Núñez de Miranda told her that God wanted a different Juana, so Sor Juana renounced her books, her fame, her vanity, her "satanic" ideas, and as penance gave up all her worldly effects. She presented a petition to the Holy Tribunal in which she pleaded for pardon from her sins. Father Juan Oviedo, S.J., states that "she rediscovered how to be 'alone with her Husband [Jesus Christ], and considering Him nailed to the cross for the sins of men, her love gave her inspiration to imitate Him, trying with all her might to crucify her passions and her appetites with such rigorous fervor in the penitence, that she needed the prudent advice and attention of Father Antonio to hold her back, lest her fervor would end her life. And Father Núñez used to say, praising God, that Juana Inés was not running, but flying to perfection.' "[13]

Her first biographer, the Jesuit Diego Calleja, reports much the same story.[14] In February 1694, Sor Juana signed in her own blood another text, entitled *Docta explicación del misterio, y voto que hizo de defender la Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora*, in which she pledged to defend that mystery and announced a special devotion to the Virgin Mary and the Immaculate Conception.[15] She sold her books to provide for the poor. She became humble and pious, and she began to scourge her own flesh. In short, the renunciation was so complete that she lost her spirit and came to believe that she was "the worst of all."[16]

Film as Interpretation

Bemberg succeeds admirably in portraying many of the known details of Sor Juana's life. In so doing, her interpretation touches on several themes that have attracted scholarly attention in the last few years. One of these debates concerns the reasons why Juana

Inés originally professed. Bemberg emphasizes the relative freedom that cloistered life promised to continue her studies. Sor Juana complained, after twenty-two years of religious life, that the spiritual duties and expectations of the community of sisters robbed her of some of her time (she served as archivist and secretary of San Jerónimo),[17] yet it was still her best option. Thus, love of learning is one answer to the question of why she professed. The film also alludes to her aversion to marriage and children. Sor Juana admits the "total antipathy I felt for marriage" and her lack of domestic aptitude.[18] In the scene where Sor Juana holds the *virreina*'s newborn son, the baby elicits a reflection from her instead of a caress. Once again the role of Núñez de Miranda as confessor is highlighted. Indirectly, too, there are quick allusions to Juana's illegitimacy, the absence of a father, her probable relative poverty, and the consequent lack of the dowry necessary for a suitable marriage. But Bemberg makes no reference to the popular belief that she professed as a reaction to a failed love affair, a point that Paz energetically rejects, in part based on Sor Juana's own words:

> and so, belovèd of so many,
> I took not one into my heart.[19]

Bemberg fails to put Juana's profession into historical context. A woman need not have a true vocation to enter a convent; one only had to be a sincere, orthodox Catholic. Women might choose the convent for other reasons. Families frequently disposed of unmarried daughters by putting them in a convent. Asunción Lavrin states, "She professed knowing that life in a convent entailed certain conditions 'most repugnant to my nature; but . . . conventual life was the least unsuitable and most desirable I could elect.' " Becoming a nun was seen as a career or occupation, a means to earn a living and maintain social respectability. To remain a spinster was not an option. Paz concludes a long analysis of this question: "It was a prudent decision consistent with the morality of the age and the habits and convictions of her class. The convent was not a ladder toward God but a refuge for a woman who found herself alone in the world."[20]

Another issue left somewhat underdeveloped and unresolved by Bemberg is whether or not Sor Juana exhibited homosexual tendencies, especially toward the wives of the two viceroys whom she encountered during her adult life. Sor Juana did not have a high

opinion of men: recall the *Hombres necios* (Foolish men) poem recited in the film.[21] In contrast, many point to her poetry as clear evidence of the love she felt for the condesa de Paredes. For example:

> There is no obstacle to love
> in gender or in absence,
> for souls, as you are well aware,
> transcend both sex and distance.[22]

Bemberg features their relationship in several scenes from quiet contentment and formal familiarity in the adoption scene, to declarations of protection in the court scene in which the pregnant condesa faints, to the close intimacy in the scene in which the condesa asks Sor Juana to loosen her bodice.

Paz explains away the lesbian suggestions, reminding us that of 216 known poems penned by Sor Juana, 52 (or one-quarter) were dedicated to the Manceras and that more than half of her works were *piezas de ocasión* (occasion pieces)—homages, epistles, felicitations, verses to commemorate the death of an archbishop or the birthday of a magnate. Most are written between 1680 and 1688, coincident with the stay in Mexico of Viceroy de la Laguna, and almost all are dedicated to him, his wife, or his son, José María (born in 1683). Paz argues that it makes no difference that these expressions and adulations grew ever more familiar and friendly, ever more exaggerated and exalted. He reminds us that New Spain, in the late seventeenth century, was regimented by a very strict social order, a chain of powers, loyalties, and subordinations. Sor Juana's work reflected the position she held in society. One had to seek support of another power, which she learned to do well at a young age, given the circumstances of her birth and upbringing. She became a friend and confidant of the condesa de Paredes, a woman only one year her junior. Her ever more fervent works of praise to her protectors were natural in that era, an expression of her subordinate and (in some ways) dependent status. Paz concludes that "the sensual expressions and amatory images could be accepted and read as metaphors and rhetorical figures of two true sentiments: appreciation and an inferior's devotion to her superior. . . . In Sor Juana's poems to the Countess of Paredes we find all the motifs of traditional amatory poetry transformed into metaphors of the relationship of gratitude and dependence that united the nun with her Vicereine."[23]

Sor Juana's first book of poetry, a volume published at the behest of the condesa in Spain, was "an homage to her and to the house of Laguna."[24] Most of the poems were written to accompany presents or to thank the giver for one. Paz concludes that modern readers confuse eroticism with feudal submission, reminding us that "an unmarried girl, especially one in Juana Inés's peculiar circumstances, who displayed her love for a man in public would have lost her reputation immediately; on the other hand, a loving friendship between women was permissible if they were of elevated rank and their sentiments idealized."[25]

Bemberg differs from Paz in leaving the issue ambiguous. On the one hand, she acknowledges that many of Sor Juana's poems are in homage to the viceroy and his wife—an argument against claims of homosexuality. Yet later, Bemberg directs the condesa to say that she does not want to hear of another viceroy's wife from the lips of her favorite nun (an indication of jealousy?). Meanwhile, Sor Juana's confessor warns her of "excessive loves" (*amores excesivos*). And, finally, the viceroy's wife wants to know the details of Sor Juana's solitary life and requests that she take off her veil. The script continues with phrases such as "Juana is mine, only mine" coming from the condesa's lips, followed by a deep kiss so that she will remember. Bemberg is not convinced by Paz's reasoned arguments to the contrary and by his reconstruction of the past.[26]

Another issue that recent studies have raised is whether or not Sor Juana was a feminist. If among feminists one includes those persons who use their abilities to defend and advance the position and power of women, then there can be no doubt about Bemberg's interpretation of Sor Juana. In one scene, music teacher Sor Juana tells her students that women are intelligent and that intelligence has no gender. Her students must keep their eyes and ears open to perceive everything. This viewpoint is coincident with Sor Juana's own words. In her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* she reiterates these beliefs. Paz states, "She scoffs at the idea, current in her day, that women are intellectually inferior. As stupidity is not confined to women, neither is intelligence an attribute only of men."[27]

Already mentioned are her thoughts about men. Who is to blame, Sor Juana asks, "she who sins and takes the pay,/or he who pays her for the sin?"[28] She lashes out at the double standard and the hypocrisy of the male-dominated culture and society. Hers, says her biographer, was a "resolute feminism."[29] Although the concept

of feminism (as such) did not exist in her day, there can be no doubt that this freethinker was one of the movement's precursors.

Finally, we might ask whether or not Sor Juana was a typical nun, a topic mentioned in passing above. Lavrin states that she was both atypical and typical at different times of her life. She was unlike Isabel de la Encarnación, a discalced Carmelite in the Convent of Puebla, who had felt a religious vocation since the age of nine. She did not live the life of a nun from the time she was a little girl, like Sor María Josefa Lino de la Canal, who founded the Convent of La Concepción in San Miguel Allende.[30] As seen in the film, she does not spend long hours on her knees either praying or scrubbing floors; she does not seem overly inclined to charity, sewing, or other "sisterly" pursuits. In short, she did not have a strong vocation for the religious life. Her motives for moving into the convent were opportunistic.

Her writing was also atypical. Many other nuns wrote autobiographies, usually at the instigation of a confessor.[31] Lavrin says that the "confessional character" of the latter condemned these works to oblivion.[32] They were regarded as a means of achieving self-perfection and were not meant to be literary works of art, as were Sor Juana's. Nuns also wrote biographies, histories of convents, plays, poetry, and personal letters, but few of these are known.

It is only during the last years of her life that we know she practiced asceticism and repented for her worldliness.[33] Sor Juana was not humble, meek, and self-effacing like other nuns. Lavrin remarks that not until her "final spiritual transformation" in 1693 do expressions of humility find their way into her writings. She quotes from the *Petición causidica*: "I, Juana Inés de la Cruz, the most insignificant of the slaves of the Blessed Mary," and "Juana Inés de la Cruz, the most unworthy and ungrateful creature of all created by your Omnipotence."[34] Sor Juana admitted having lived a religious life without religion.[35] Bemberg, fittingly, portrays her death after self-sacrificing scenes of her aiding the ailing. One suspects, though, that she died "although virgin; pregnant with divine concepts."[36]

Suggested Readings

Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sister. *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Trans. Alan S. Trueblood. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. This collection of Sor Juana's writings is helpful for an English-reading audience.

Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sor. *Obras completas*. 4 vols. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951. A popular edition of Sor Juana's known writings.

———. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Sus mejores poesías*. Mexico: Gómez Hermanos Editores, 1980. A collection of some of Sor Juana's best poems in a single volume.

Franco, Jean. *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. This interesting book focuses attention on women in Mexico. Chapters mention individuals such as Sor Juana and Frida Kahlo, as well as whole classes of women such as the deluded women of colonial times.

Lavrin, Asunción. "Unlike Sor Juana? The Model Nun in the Religious Literature of Colonial Mexico," *University of Dayton Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 75–92. Lavrin has written a good article that stresses the fact that Sor Juana was both typical and atypical of other women who entered convents in colonial Mexico at different times in her life.

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Merrim, Stephanie. "Toward a Feminist Reading of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Past, Present, and Future Directions in Sor Juana Criticism." In *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Stephanie Merrim, 11–37. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. Merrim asks the question: Is Sor Juana a feminist?

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Schons, Dorothy. "Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." In *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Stephanie Merrim, 38–60. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. Schons provides a short analysis of various points of Sor Juana's life, based on the nun's writings and other documents.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mission and Historical Missions

Film and the Writing of History

James Schofield Saeger

The Mission *(1986); produced by Fernando Ghia and David Puttnam; directed by Roland Joffé; written by Robert Bolt; color; 126 minutes; Goldcrest. Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), a Jesuit missionary in colonial Paraguay, converts the pagan Guarani Indians to Christianity and saves slave trader Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert DeNiro) from despair. They all live together in peace until political considerations in Europe require that the Jesuits abandon their mission to the Portuguese, who threaten to re-enslave the natives.*

Because of the power of film, movies with historical themes affect public perceptions of the past more deeply than do scholarly reconstructions. Filmmakers and historians search for meaning in separate ways, but their quests can converge. Examples of different approaches to similar destinations are found in a newer film and older historical views of Catholic missions in South America. *The Mission*, directed by Roland Joffé with a screenplay by Robert Bolt, displays paternalistic attitudes like those of an earlier generation of North American academic historians.[1] The film's voice is a white European distortion of Native American reality. This essay will examine that voice, offer alternative explanations

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