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The History of Early Modern Medicine in New Spain, El Primero Sueño, and Poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Daniel Hughes

Hunter College of the City University of New York, mdanielhughes@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

I wish to thank Professor Michael Goyette for his assistance with this article.

**The History of Early Modern Medicine in New Spain,
El Primero Sueño, and Poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**

This essay analyzes poetry and other writing by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (hereinafter “Sor Juana”) in the context of themes from Greco-Roman antiquity and the historical development of medicine in seventeenth century New Spain, now Mexico. Sor Juana’s First Dream/*El Primero Sueño*, a Spanish language poetic *silva*, published in 1692, is replete with allusions to Ovid, Aristotle, and other classical writers.¹ Establishing a context steeped in ideas from Greco-Roman antiquity, Sor Juana invokes the medical and philosophical legacy of foundational physician Galen of Pergamon. She also expands upon his ideas into the human anatomical realm, reflecting the increased early modern prominence of Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius, whose seminal book *De humani corporis fabrica*, had become highly influential both in Spain (due in part to Vesalius’ role as court physician to both Charles V and Philip II) and its colonies.² Sor Juana’s ideas on medicine and anatomy, particularly within the wider context of

¹ The *silva* consists of mostly rhymed eleven-syllable hendecasyllables (*endecasílabos*) and seven-syllable heptasyllables (*heptasílabos*), comprising a capacious poetic structure with no fixed order or rhyme and no strict number of lines. The *silva* became a prominent poetic form in the Spanish language beginning in the early 1600s and was used by writers of the Spanish Golden Age (*El Siglo de Oro*), including Lope de Vega, Juan Antonio Calderón, Francisco de Quevedo, and Luis de Góngora, who was a particularly salient poetic influence for Sor Juana, as evidenced in First Dream/*El Primero Sueño*. Elias L Rivers, "Problems of genre in Golden Age poetry." *MLN* 102, no. 2 (1987): 217.

² Fabio Zampieri, *et al.* “Andreas Vesalius: Celebrating 500 Years of dissecting nature.” *Global Cardiology Science and Practice*. 2015.66. Accessed November 12, 2018. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/gcsp.2015.66>.

seventeenth century New Spain, provide useful context for the final, controversial period of her life in which she appears to have briefly stopped writing, sold many of her possessions for the upkeep of the poor, ministered to her fellow nuns during a plague, and then fallen victim to the same disease. The intellectual richness of Sor Juana's literary legacy both underscores the scholarly vitality of New Spain in the late seventeenth century and demonstrates her dogged personal commitment to universal access to education regardless of gender. An investigation into Sor Juana's classical learning and literary conception of medicine, alongside her biography and eventual work as a healer, will be used as the basis for a novel framework for better understanding the inscrutable last years of her life.

Sor Juana, who was born in 1651 (or possibly 1648) and died in 1695, was a Mexican nun, writer, and savant, termed the "Phoenix of Mexico, the Tenth Muse, Poetess of America" in a 1700 edition of her works published posthumously in Madrid.³ She was born in humble means as the illegitimate daughter of a Spanish army officer in San Juan Neplanta, near Mexico City.⁴ Sor Juana was Creole, meaning that her family was European, although she had been born in the Americas and never lived in or even visited Iberia. In adolescence,

³ Peden Margaret Sayers, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. (Salisbury: Lime Rock Press, 1982), 5.

⁴ Ascunción Lavrin, "Women in Colonial Mexico" in *The Oxford History of Mexico* edited by Beezeley & Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 260.

Sor Juana moved to Mexico City where she lived as a lady-in-waiting at the court of the viceroy. She mastered Latin and the Aztec language of Nahuatl and displayed her intelligence in prose, verse, and a public intellectual display orchestrated by the contemporary vicereine, Leonor Carreto, the Marquise de Mancera, who became her patron during her adolescence.⁵ Due to this patronage, Sor Juana lived in the viceregal household during her teenage years.⁶

Sor Juana's prodigious and precocious learning, alongside her reputed physical beauty and viceregal patronage, brought her to the attention of suitors. She decided to become a nun instead of marrying, however, to have more freedom to study and write rather than to care for children and manage a household. Sor Juana wrote of this decision: ". . . so I entered the religious order, knowing that life there entailed certain conditions . . . most repugnant to my nature; but given the total antipathy I felt for marriage, I deemed convent life the least unsuitable and the most honorable I could elect if I were to ensure my salvation."⁷ In seventeenth century New Spain, only women of European descent could enter a convent and a dowry payment was required; Sor Juana found funding for this dowry from wealthy patrons. She entered a Carmelite convent in

⁵ Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 89.

⁶ Fanchón Royer, "Tenth Muse: An Essay in Commemoration of the Three Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Sor Juana Inés." *The Americas* 8, no. 2 (1951): 149.

⁷ Margo Glantz, "Octavio Paz and Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz's Posthumous Fame," *Pacific Coast Philology* (1993): 132.

1667 as a novice, but left after a few months due to professed ill-health and perhaps because she also found the Carmelites too austere and too strict.⁸ Not long after, Sor Juana professed in 1669 in Mexico City at the Convent of Santa Paula devoted to Saint Jerome.⁹ There, the rules for nuns were not particularly strict and they mostly lived “private lives” without rigid observance of communal norms; each nun lived in her own cell and “there cooked, ate, sewed, and received visits from the other nuns.”¹⁰ The Jeronymite convent also had a school for girls attached and sponsored many musical and dramatic entertainments, for which Sor Juana often composed lyrics and songs. Of the scholarly convent culture of the era, Lavrin observes: “The opportunity and privilege of education and the possibility of writing nurtured the genius of one exceptional nun [Sor Juana], who confessed in her mature years that she had professed because she lacked interest in marriage and, although aware of the problems implied in cloistered life, it would allow her to enjoy the freedom she wished for learning and writing.”¹¹

After the Marquise de Mancera, who was Sor Juana’s vicereine patroness, and her husband returned to Spain, Sor Juana, despite living entirely within the Jeronymite convent walls, became popular with subsequent viceroys and vicereines. Accordingly, Sor Juana found a new patron in a subsequent vicereine,

⁸ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 113.

⁹ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 124.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lavrin, “Women in Colonial Mexico,” 260.

the Marquise de la Laguna, Maria Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, whose husband, the Marquis de la Laguna, was named the new viceroy of New Spain in 1680.¹² Later, after the Marquise de la Laguna also returned to Spain (and because Sor Juana never visited Iberia herself), the vicereine oversaw the first European publication, in Madrid, of Sor Juana's writing as *Inundacion castalida* or the "Overflowing of the Castalian Spring," in 1689, which brought Sor Juana's work to a continental audience.¹³ Sor Juana, in return, dedicated literary works to both vicereines, the Marquise de Mancera and the Marquise de la Laguna, often depicting them with tropes of queenship in her writing. Sor Juana also composed a *loa*, a brief dramatic work, praising the unpopular Queen Maria Luisa de Orléans (1662-1689), the childless French first wife of the deformed King Charles II (1661-1700, reigned 1665-1700), Spain's last Hapsburg monarch.¹⁴ While Sor Juana's compositions dedicated to the vicereines and Queen Maria Luisa herself, as well as her personal relationships with the vicereines, demonstrated that she was acutely aware of the power and connections of these noblewomen, Sor Juana also remained broadly popular with the male political and intellectual elite of the Mexico City of her day and was frequently visited by the viceroys of New Spain,

¹² George Antony Thomas, "The Queen's Two Bodies: Sor Juana and New Spain's Vicereines," *Hispania* (2009): 418.

¹³ George Antony Thomas, "La Décima Musa" and the Classical Tradition: Sor Juana Inés and the Poetry of Empire," *Letras Femeninas* 35, no. 2 (2009): 255.

¹⁴ Thomas, "The Queen's Two Bodies," 418.

arguably the most powerful men in the Americas during the seventeenth century, at her convent.

Moreover, at the Jeronymite convent, Sor Juana continued to write and engage intellectually and socially with a wider audience; however as a cloistered nun, she was theoretically required to do so from behind a grill in the convent *locutorio*.¹⁵ Here again, however, at the Convent of Santa Paula, rules related to the cloister were not strictly enforced and “the viceroys and their companions frequently visited the convent, and the nuns received these visitors in the locutory and even the sacristy, without a veil.”¹⁶ Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz asserted the following concerning Sor Juana’s presence first at the viceregal court and later in the convent: “Although it may seem strange, the two places where men and women could congregate for the purpose of intellectual and aesthetic communication were the convent locutory and the palace drawing room. Sor Juana made use of them both.”¹⁷ Sor Juana continued to receive gifts from powerful benefactors in the locutory and there was “a constant flow of gifts, notes, flowers, sweets, and portraits between [the viceregal] palace and convent.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Sor Juana was paid commissions for literary works written on behalf of individual patrons and religious entities. For example, Sor

¹⁵ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 1.

¹⁶ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 125.

¹⁷ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 45.

¹⁸ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 192.

Juana was commissioned to design one of two triumphal arches for the 1680 arrival of a new viceroy in Mexico City. In addition to designing this structure, she also celebrated the new viceroy in writing as a modern-day Neptune, composing an encomiastic treatise *Allegorical Neptune* on classical themes and describing why the viceroy was properly analogized to the Roman god, and was paid 200 pesos for her efforts.¹⁹ Sor Juana's skill as both a recipient of largesse and as a money manager was recognized by her fellow nuns who elected her the convent treasurer on multiple occasions. Meanwhile, Sor Juana assembled a wide-ranging personal library both via gifts given to her and by purchases made by funds she assembled from her patrons and commissions. Even at the time of her death in 1695 when most of her library had already been seized by the Archbishop of Mexico City, Sor Juana's jewels, cash, and other remaining assets were valued at 5200 pesos, which was a substantial sum for the era, particularly for a creole woman born illegitimate and poor.²⁰

In her mostly autodidactic learning, Sor Juana engaged with a wide variety of theological and classical sources, with her cell transformed into "a study filled with books, works of art, and scientific instruments."²¹ Fittingly, in a baroque portrait of Sor Juana by Mexican artist Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768) undertaken in

¹⁹ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 192.

²⁰ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 468.

²¹ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 1.

1750, fifty-five years after her death, Sor Juana is depicted with her prodigious library:²²



Salient among Sor Juana's books, as depicted by Cabrera, are medical treatises by Galen of Pergamon and Hippocrates,²³ as well as volumes by myriad other writers

²² An open source depiction of Miguel Cabrera's portrait of Sor Juana (1750) may be found in the Wiki Commons at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miguel_Cabrera_\(painter\)#/media/File:Sor_Juana_by_Miguel_Cabrera.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miguel_Cabrera_(painter)#/media/File:Sor_Juana_by_Miguel_Cabrera.png).

²³ Treatises by Galen of Pergamon and Hippocrates can be seen in Miguel Cabrera's painting to the right of Sor Juana's head on the second shelf from the top.

of Greco-Roman antiquity, including Seneca and Virgil. Cabrera took inspiration from an earlier painting of Sor Juana in her library by Juan de Miranda, for which Sor Juana may have actually sat as the model at some date between 1680-1688.²⁴ As Cabrera was not painting Sor Juana or her possessions from life, his portrayal of her library may also reflect the literary sources cited in her writings. In her poetry and prose, Sor Juana contextualized writers and thinkers from antiquity within a wide-ranging context that was both sacred and profane, classical and ecclesiastical. In this, she reflected her writerly and intellectual milieu in New Spain which was “markedly religious . . . theology was the queen of sciences . . . Similarly distinctive was the blending of the Christian tradition with classical humanism: the Bible with Ovid, St. Augustine with Cicero, and St. Catherine with the Erythraean sibyl.”²⁵ Within this intellectual rubric, Sor Juana experimented with poetic and prose forms and languages, as Peden observes: “Plays, poems, prose. The lyric, the panegyric, the satire. . . Poems containing a mixture of Spanish, Latin, Nahuatl . . . First Dream [*El Primero Sueño*], Sor Juana’s master work.”²⁶ Moreover, Sor Juana’s research and writing straddles a wide variety of subjects across both natural sciences and humanities.

²⁴ Ryan Prendergast, "Constructing an Icon: The self-referentiality and framing of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* (2007): 29.

²⁵ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 44.

²⁶ Peden, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 11.

One commentator analogizes Sor Juana to fellow polymath and nun Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) of Germany, stating that alongside Sor Juana, Hildegard is “the only other woman whose writings exhibit a comparable complexity and variety of genre, and universal curiosity.”²⁷ Another commentator expands on this comparison, stating that the poem *First Dream/El Primero Sueño* “has enabled critics to situate Sor Juana in the mystical tradition along with other female writers such as Teresa de Avila and Hildegard of Bingen.”²⁸ While it is true that Sor Juana’s *First Dream/El Primero Sueño* charts the speaker’s erudite, mystical dream, Sor Juana’s poem is nonetheless distinguishable in a crucial way from the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila or Hildegard of Bingen. Both of those women writers claimed mystical, trance-like states of altered consciousness as the foundation for their legitimacy as mouthpieces of divine witness.²⁹ By contrast, Sor Juana makes no such claim for *First Dream/El Primero Sueño* and this *silva* is characterized as least equally by *logos*, as by mystical enchantment.

While many of Sor Juana’s published writings (but none of the original manuscripts³⁰) are extant, most contemporaneous and nearly contemporaneous

²⁷ Gillian TW Ahlgren, Introduction to *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Gillian TW Ahlgren (Paulist Press, 2005), 5.

²⁸ Lilian Albertina Contreras-Silva, "Tradition, Rhetoric, and Propriety in Sor Juana Ines De La Cruz." (2000), 108.

²⁹ Contreras-Silva, "Tradition, Rhetoric, and Propriety in Sor Juana Ines De La Cruz", 108.

³⁰ Sor Juana’s signed confession from 1694 is extant, but this is not a manuscript that was intended for literary publication.

biographical information about her comes from two sources: 1) Father Diego Calleja's introduction, written in 1700, to a volume of her writings published in Madrid five years after her death in 1695 and 2) an autobiographical public letter known as *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* ("*La Respuesta*") published in 1691 as Sor Juana's response to a critical published letter from the Bishop of Puebla.³¹ *La Respuesta*, in addition to serving as a biographical source, is a vigorous defense of the right of women to study, learn, and write, with a dazzling array of references to classical, Biblical, ecclesiastical, and modern sources and examples. *La Respuesta* was undertaken after Sor Juana delivered a stinging rhetorical refutation, from behind the iron grill of the convent locutory, to a Maundy Thursday sermon preached decades previously in 1650 by a Portuguese Jesuit named Antonio Vieira (1608-1697). Sor Juana believed that Vieira's sermon contradicted the theology of three of the four seminal Doctors of the Church: Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose, and Saint John Chrysostom.³² A now unknown person urged Sor Juana to write down her theological critique. Her letter was printed as *La Carta Athenagórica*, possibly meaning "Letter Worthy of Athena" but more likely referring to the classical writer Athenagoras who had written a defense of Christianity against paganism.³³ Shortly thereafter, the

³¹ Peden, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 5.

³² Peden, *A Woman of Genius: The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 1.

³³ Commentary by Anna More in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Translated by Edith Grossman. Edited by Anna More. (New York: Norton, 2016), 84.

Bishop of Puebla published *La Carta Athenagórica* and an accompanying public letter urging Sor Juana to focus on sacred rather than profane pursuits—a strange admonition to a nun who had just written a theological treatise in defense of the Doctors of the Church. In so doing, the Bishop of Puebla adopted the female literary persona of “Sor Filotea de la Cruz” (“Faithful Sister of the Cross”).

Sor Juana, fully aware that Sor Filotea was a pen name of the Bishop of Puebla, wrote *La Respuesta* as an intellectually vigorous, sometimes mocking response, frequently invoking Greco-Roman classical thought and idiom. *La Respuesta* has a dizzying range of classical references including to Seneca, Quintilian, Saint Jerome, Pliny the Elder, Horace, and Pindar. In response to the idea that women might be concerned largely with “kitchen philosophies,” Sor Juana asserts: “I say that if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more.”³⁴ Sor Juana here implies that cooking, a pursuit with a traditionally feminine association, would only have deepened and enriched Aristotle’s scientific and philosophical output given the related knowledge of chemical and physical properties involved. Shortly thereafter in the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana launches into an extended litany of powerful women, beginning with Biblical women including Deborah, Abigail, Esther, and the Queen of Sheba; the text then exalts women—real, apocryphal, and imaginary—from antiquity, including the

³⁴ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “La Respuesta” in *Selected Works*, 110.

goddess Minerva, Polla Argentaria (wife of the Latin poet Lucan), and Hypatia of Alexandria, a female mathematician and Neoplatonist philosopher murdered by a mob. Sor Juana's *Respuesta* places women, via their role in Biblical, classical, and early modern knowledge development and political power, at the center of western civilization. It is a dynamic response to the male Bishop of Puebla's gender-bending posture of taking the role of female *Sor Filotea* to criticize Sor Juana's public theological commentary; Sor Juana may be slyly asserting that the Bishop was quite right to adopt a female intellectual persona, even if she contests vigorously his line of argument—even perhaps implying that an actual woman would not have launched such a foolish critique.

In the *Respuesta*, Sor Juana refers to her poetic masterpiece *El Primero Sueño* (English: *First Dream*),³⁵ meaning that this poem of 975 lines, widely considered her masterwork, was written in 1691 or earlier. Structured in the form of intellectually wide-ranging free verses known as a *silva* and showing the influence of the Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), the poem was first published in 1692.³⁶ While Sor Juana had considerable experience with shorter and more controlled verse forms like the sonnet, she chose the capacious format of a *silva* for the intellectual odyssey of *El Primero Sueño*. The poem concerns the scholarly journey of “*El Alma*” or “the soul,” shortly after sleep and

³⁵ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “La Respuesta” in *Selected Works*, 121.

³⁶ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 54.

through a long night of intellectual contemplation, rich in allusions to Greco-Roman antiquity, including Ovid, Aristotle and Galen, until the final line where there is an awakening of the ensouled speaker.

The poem is enshrouded in a universalist gender aesthetic as the speaker “*El Alma*” is never specified as belonging to a man or a woman until the final line of the poem where there is the rousing from sleep (“*y yo despierta;*” English: “and I awaken”) where it becomes clear that the subject is female from the feminine Spanish “a” ending of *despierta*. Linguistically, “*El Alma*” itself is an entity that straddles genders as the feminine noun *Alma* nonetheless takes the masculine article *El*; this diction underscores Sor Juana’s “universalist aesthetic”³⁷ which transcends a strict gender dichotomy.

The image of the Pyramid (*Pyramidal*), evoking monumental architecture of both ancient Egypt and pre-Colombian Mexico, looms as the first word of *El Primero Sueño*: “Pyramidal, funereal, a shadow / born of earth, aspiring to highest heaven” (lines 1-2) (*Piramidal, funesta de la tierra nacida sombra al cielo encaminaba*).³⁸ This pyramidal edifice represents the system of knowledge chronicled, constructed, and ascended by *El Alma* in the poem. *El Primero Sueño*

³⁷ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 57-58.

³⁸ For *El Primero Sueño*, all English language line citations refer to the translation by Edith Grossman of the poem as *First Dream* in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, ed. by Anna More. (New York: Norton, 2016), 45-66. Text of the original Spanish is provided for all citations from *El Primero Sueño*, with reference to the version found at: <http://www.seg.guanajuato.gob.mx/Ceducativa/CDocumental/Doctos/2012/Noviembre/15112012/PrimeroSue%C3%B1o.pdf>. Accessed November 11, 2018.

specifies Sor Juana's Pyramid as a Greco-Egyptian derivation: "tomb and banner to the Ptolemies" (lines 308-309) (*tumba y bandera fue a los Ptolomeos*). With this poetic reference, Sor Juana demonstrates the belief, commonplace in the seventeenth century, that the Pyramids were the work of the Greco-Egyptian Ptolemies, rather than the much more ancient Old Kingdom pharaohs.³⁹

Another idiosyncrasy of the poem suggests that Sor Juana, while well versed in Latin, nonetheless read some of her Roman sources in the vernacular Spanish, rather than in Latin editions. In one of her numerous references to Ovid, she refers in line 88 to a naiad from the *Metamorphoses* as "Almone," which editors have frequently corrected to "Halcyon" or "Alcione," reflecting the original Ovid.⁴⁰ Now, however, scholars have established that this naming of the naiad as "Almone" suggests strongly that Sor Juana was reading Ovid in Spanish, as a 1595 translation by Jorge de Bustamanete available in New Spain contained this naming error of "Almone."⁴¹ This scholarly finding implies that in seventeenth century New Spain, the Spanish vernacular, as well as Latin and Greek, was an important medium for the transmission of texts penned in classical antiquity.

El Primero Sueño reflects an Aristotelian framework for the soul, including the concepts of a hierarchy of vegetative, animal, and rational souls, and

³⁹ Commentary by Anna More in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 53.

⁴⁰ Commentary by Anna More in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

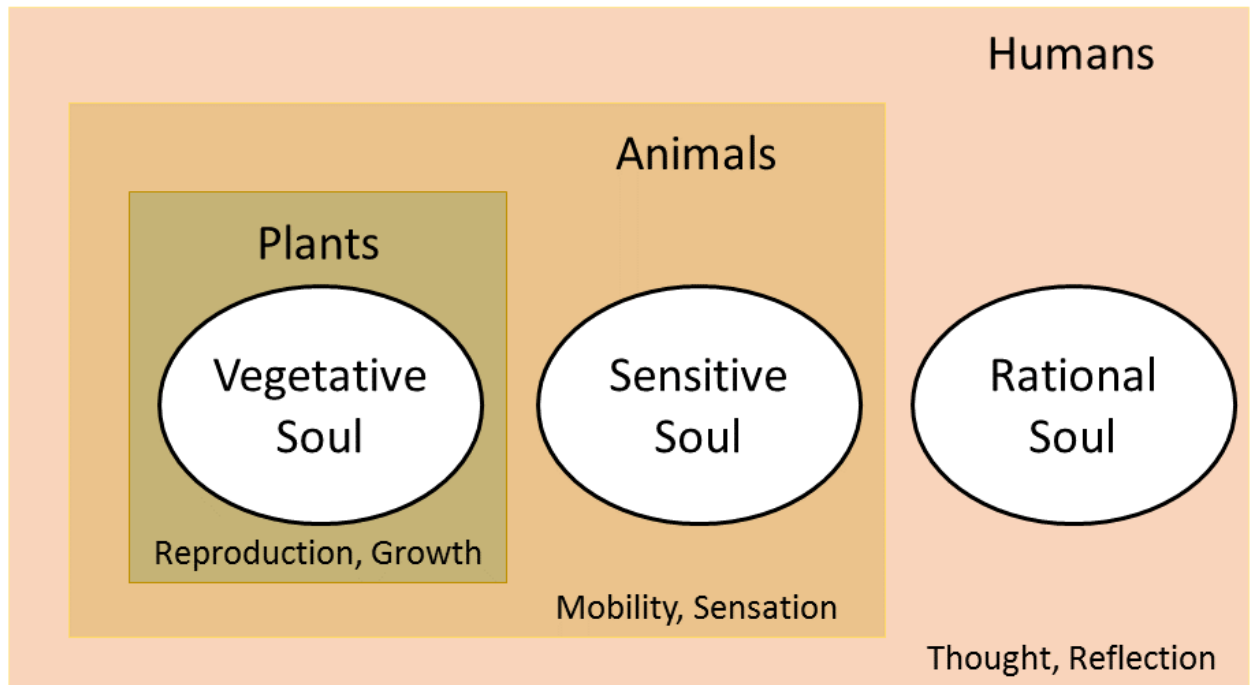
the view that the soul is coupled to the body. In Aristotle's work *On The Soul* (often referred to by its Latin title of *De Anima*), he observes: "the soul is inseparable from its body" (but provides for a few possible exceptions).⁴² Reflecting this Aristotelian coupling of soul to body, Sor Juana writes of "the coarse corporeal chain" (line 267) (*corporal cadena que grosera embaraza*) keeping the speaker's rational soul from breaking the connection to the body. Thus, while *El Alma* of *El Primero Sueño* embarks upon an intellectual journey, including a sojourn through the classical canon, *El Alma* never actually leaves the body; the final line of the poem is thus better understood as an awakening of the body and soul forever enmeshed, rather than the return of the wandering soul ("yo despierta").

The rubric of the soul proposed in Aristotle's *On The Soul* proposes three types of souls: vegetative (possessed by plants, animals, and humans), animal or "sensitive" (possessed by animals and humans), and rational (possessed only by humans).⁴³ The Aristotelian schema of souls may be displayed schematically as:⁴⁴

⁴² Some commentators argue that the arguably Christianized word "soul" is more properly rendered as "Life-Force" in the context of Aristotle, particularly as this entity is generally indivisible from the body in the Aristotelian framework.

⁴³ Aristotle, *De Anima (On The Soul)*, Book 2. English Translation at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>. Accessed November 12, 2018.

⁴⁴ Wiki Commons at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Soul#/media/File:Aristotelian_Soul.png.



Sor Juana describes the vegetative soul component of the speaker as that which merely: “confers wages of vegetative warmth to languid limbs and tranquil bones” (lines 182-83) (*lánguidos miembros, sosegados huesos, los gajes del calor vegetativo*). This description of the vegetative soul invites a contrast with the erudite, rational soul of *El Alma*. Within the Aristotelian framework of Sor Juana’s *El Primero Sueño*, the rudimentary character of the vegetative soul serves as counterpoint to the intellectuality of the rational soul component of *El Alma*.

In addition to its references to Aristotle and Ovid, *El Primero Sueño* engages with both classical and early modern medicine. The poem reflects academic medical currents in Spain and New Spain in the late seventeenth centuries. Medicine is understood within a context rooted in antiquity—

particularly the writings of Galen and Hippocrates and the concept of bodily humors—alongside a renewed attention to anatomy and dissection exemplified by the research of Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) and having roots even earlier in the Spanish universities of the late medieval period.⁴⁵

Sor Juana demonstrates the defining medical influence of Galen of Pergamon in *El Primero Sueño*, even referring to medical doctors generically as “other Galens” (line 452) (*otro galeno*) and invoking Galen’s belief in the importance of the balance of the four bodily humors (blood, phlegm, black bile, yellow bile). The concept of the four humors, associated with Galen, features saliently in the more ancient medical theories set forth in the Hippocratic corpus.⁴⁶ Galen, working in the second century A.D., brought increased attention to the humors as the basis for the existing Hippocratic tradition in medicine.⁴⁷ The following excerpt from “The Nature of Man,” attributed variously to Hippocrates, his disciple Polybius, or another acolyte, succinctly sets forth the Galenic-Hippocratic humoral theory of antiquity:

The human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is primarily that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other,

⁴⁵ Guenter B. Risse. “Medicine in New Spain.” In *Medicine in the New World: New Spain, New France, and New England* edited by Ronald L. Numbers. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 22.

⁴⁶ H. W. Miller. “The Aetiology of Disease in Plato's *Timaeus*.” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 93, 175-187, (1962).

⁴⁷ Jacques Jouanna, “The legacy of the Hippocratic treatise the nature of man: The theory of the four humours.” In *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, (Brill, 2012), 338.

both in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated in the body and not mixed with the others.⁴⁸

Thus, in the Galenic-Hippocratic system of medicine, imbalances—that is excesses or deficiencies of a certain humor—are what lead to illness and pain.

This humoral system of medical diagnosis continued to be influential in Europe and New Spain in the late seventeenth century⁴⁹ and is reflected in Sor Juana's poetry, including *El Primero Sueño*. The following excerpt from the poem, describing how sleep occurs and how memories are stored in the human consciousness permanently, reflects a synthesis of ideas derived from Galen, Hippocrates, and Aristotle:

. . . templada hoguera del calor humano, al cerebro enviaba húmedos, mas tan claros los vapores de los atemperados cuatro humores, que con ellos no sólo empañaba los simulacros que la estimativa dio a la imaginativa, y aquesta por custodia más segura en forma ya más pura entregó a la memoria que, oficiosa, gravó tenaz y guarda cuidadosa sino que daban a la fantasía lugar de que formase imágenes diversas.

Then a temperate fire of human heat
That transmitted to the brain
The damp but most clear vapors
Of the four tempered humors
That not only did not cloud the semblances
The intellect gave to imagination
Which, for safer keeping and in purer form,
Presented them to diligent memory
That etched them, tenacious, and guards them with care,
But permitted fantasy

⁴⁸ Hippocrates (Attributed). "The Nature of Man." *Hippocratic Writings*. Translated by J. Chadwick and W. N. Mann. (London: Penguin, 1983), 262.

⁴⁹ Risse, "Medicine in New Spain," 34.

To form diverse images. . . (lines 231-241)

This section of *El Primero Sueño*, while referencing the “four tempered humors” of the Galenic-Hippocratic system, sets forth poetically the Aristotelian model of sleep, which held that “most clear vapors” would emanate upward from the stomach after digestion; these clear vapors impeded external but not internal senses, allowing for sleep to occur but for other natural bodily functions to continue.⁵⁰ Further reflecting Aristotelian physiology, *El Primero Sueño* posits that during sleep images are being permanently recorded in the memory (“Presented them to diligent memory / That etched them.”) Sor Juana thus deploys a synthesis of Aristotelian and Galenic-Hippocratic concepts to explain the sleep and memory of *El Alma*.

With these medical references in *El Primero Sueño*, Sor Juana reflects the salience of the ideas of Galen and Hippocrates within the academic training received by highly educated physicians of New Spain.⁵¹ Peninsular Spain, during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had embarked on a program of medical

⁵⁰ Commentary by Anna More in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 51.

⁵¹ Spain and New Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were served by a gamut of medical practitioners with a range of levels of formal medical training, depending upon whether they were various sub-types of physicians, surgeons, or apothecaries. Describing the upper levels of this hierarchy, Risse states: “At the top of the professional pyramid was the physician with a doctoral degree, a rarity limited to those seeking an academic career. Not far below those doctors were the *licenciado* or licentiate and the *bachiller* or bachelor, both of whom held university degrees conferred to candidates who had completed their prescribed medical studies but were unwilling or unable to undergo the multiple formalities required for the doctorate. One step further down in the medical hierarchy were the so-called Latin surgeons, a distinct but growing minority of surgeons with university training.” Risse, “Medicine in New Spain,” 13.

reform, due in part to a shortage in trained medical personnel after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.⁵² Before the Alhambra Decree's edict of expulsion in 1492, the medical profession had been a prominent career for a significant number of Jewish men in Iberia during the last two decades of the *Reconquista*. "In the countries of Mediterranean Europe during the High or Late Middle Ages (1250 onward), one can hardly find a Jewish community that did not count at least one medical doctor among its members. Next to moneylending, medicine seems to have been the most preponderant profession among Jews."⁵³ Thus, the expulsion of the sizable Jewish population from Spain in 1492 created a medical crisis—one that was responded to in part by increasing academic medical training⁵⁴ and by further formalizing medical licensing requirements; this medical reform program extended across the Atlantic from Spain to New Spain. Just thirty years after the conquest of the Aztecs, the University of Mexico was founded in 1551,⁵⁵ and its first chair of medicine was created in 1578.⁵⁶ Medical students in New Spain, who needed to demonstrate purity of blood⁵⁷ (*limpieza de*

⁵² Risse, "Medicine in New Spain," 14.

⁵³ Joseph Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine, and Medieval Society*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

⁵⁴ In Spain, "Medical education became available at a number of institutions, such as the University of Valencia (1500), Zaragoza (1500), Seville (1508), and especially Alcalá de Henares (1510), which quickly became, with Salamanca and Valladolid, one of the most famous institutions of higher learning in Spain." Risse, "Medicine in New Spain," 16.

⁵⁵ Risse, "Medicine in New Spain," 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Meaning that they were "Old Christians" and not the descendants of recently converted Jews or Moors.

sangre) and adherence to Catholicism, studied a thoroughly Galenic-Hippocratic curriculum: “. . . students studied for four years. During the first two, they read a number of Hippocratic works dealing with humoral theory, temperaments, the nature of man, fevers and pulse. In the third year, students listened to the aphorisms of Hippocrates . . . in the fourth, they studied Galen’s *Metodo Medendii*.”⁵⁸

Simultaneously, however, anatomical study and dissection of the human body in European institutions, epitomized in the work of Andreas Vesalius,⁵⁹ was revolutionizing the medicine of Spain and New Spain. Galen himself either never or only very rarely dissected human bodies to learn anatomy.⁶⁰ Instead, Galen’s “study of anatomy centered largely on the dissection of animals, and thus relied on the perceived physical similarities between animals and humans to apply his discoveries to the practical treatment of human patients.”⁶¹ Nonetheless, “Galen’s anatomy,” although “based on that of animals” laid “the foundation of Renaissance anatomy,” which incorporated human dissection.⁶² By contrast,

⁵⁸ Risse, “Medicine in New Spain,” 34.

⁵⁹ Sanjib Kumar Ghosh. “Human cadaveric dissection: a historical account from ancient Greece to the modern era.” *Anatomy and Cell Biology*. 2015; 48:157, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4582158/pdf/acb-48-153.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Anastasia Conner. “Galen’s Analogy: Animal Experimentation and Anatomy in the Second Century C.E.,” *Anthos*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 9. (2017), 118, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=anthos>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Susan Mattern. *The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

human autopsies were rarely undertaken in the ancient world, with a few exceptions, including those that may have been performed in Ptolemaic Alexandria.⁶³ The uncommonness of human dissection in the ancient world continued into the early medieval era, with a few notable exceptions.⁶⁴

This situation changed in the late medieval period, particularly in Italy, where a first recorded autopsy occurred in the 1280s.⁶⁵ Shortly thereafter, the 1300s saw “the emergence of autopsy and dissection as a regular and integral part of both legal practice and medical training in the cities of northern and central Italy.”⁶⁶ Two centuries later, this Italian medical and intellectual climate influenced Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) as a professor at the University of Padua. The publication of his *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) conclusively brought human dissection and related anatomical study into the mainstream of western medicine as part of a “paradigm shift.”⁶⁷ The work of Vesalius was “enthusiastically embraced” at the University of Valencia and other Spanish institutions; “[o]ne of the most important consequences of the Vesalian approach to human anatomy in Spain was the popularization of human dissections and

⁶³ Heinrich Von Staden. “The Discovery of the Body: Human Dissection and Its Cultural Contexts in Ancient Greece.” *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*. 65 (1992), 223.

⁶⁴ Ghosh, “Human cadaveric dissection: a historical account from ancient Greece to the modern era,” 154.

⁶⁵ Katharine Park, “The criminal and the saintly body: autopsy and dissection in Renaissance Italy.” *Renaissance quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994): 3.

⁶⁶ Park, “The criminal and the saintly body,” 3.

⁶⁷ Ghosh, “Human cadaveric dissection: a historical account from ancient Greece to the modern era,” 158.

description of normal and pathological findings.”⁶⁸ Reflecting this Vesalian influence in the mother country, the first known dissection of a human body occurred in New Spain in 1576.⁶⁹ Presiding at this dissection was physician Juan de la Fuente, who had arrived in Mexico with a copy of Andreas Vesalius’ *De humani corporis fabrica* as one of a trove of eighty-two medical books that included Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicenna.⁷⁰ Given that the anatomical work of Vesalius remained present in New Spain in the seventeenth century, it appears likely that Sor Juana was either directly influenced by Vesalius’ writing or collaterally influenced by the medical-intellectual climate, fostered by his dissections and anatomical research into the human form, within the Spanish realms.

Reflecting this intellectual current in Spain and New Spain, Sor Juana’s *El Primero Sueño* expands upon its Aristotelian-Galenic-Hippocratic platform and performs a Vesalian literary dissection of the human body. Given that Sor Juana had no access to the “spaces available in Mexico for anatomical experimentation,” she gathered knowledge from books and used “poetic space,” particularly in *El*

⁶⁸ Risse, “Medicine in New Spain,” 22.

⁶⁹ Stephanie Kirk. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico*. (London: Routledge, 2016), 111-112.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Primero Sueño, to carry out her figurative human dissections.⁷¹ One apt example appears in the poem's literary dissection of a human lung:

. . . respirante fuelle pulmón, que imán del viento es atractivo, que en movimientos nunca desiguales o comprimiendo yo o ya dilatando el musculoso, claro, arcaduz blando, hace que en él resuelle el que le circunscribe fresco ambiente . . .

. . . a breathing
bellows (the lung that like a magnet attracts
air in never uneven movements, either
constricting or expanding
the conduit, muscular yet clear and soft,
making it breathe in the cool surrounding air (lines 194-199)

In this excerpt, a human lung (*pulmón*), as the powerful bellows of *El Alma*, is analyzed in great physical detail. Sor Juana's poetic language takes on the character of a human anatomical dissection, analyzing the physiology of the lungs and their oxygenation of the blood. As the lung, "muscular yet clear and soft," is in physiological use, language allows for dissection—or vivisection—of the lung without the attendant gruesomeness. While physiologically precise, the language in this passage also ensconces the vivisected lung in lyrical description, as that which warms the "cool surrounding air" to enable human life. Sor Juana's poetry here reflects the renewal of interest in human dissection as a mode of medical learning occurring in the wake of Vesalius' seminal work of anatomy.

⁷¹ Stephanie Kirk, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico*, 114.

Shortly after the publication of *El Primero Sueño* and the *Respuesta*, an abrupt change in Sor Juana's circumstances occurred; this shift is not fully explicable, but was possibly connected to a diminishment in the prestige of her viceregal and Spanish patrons, recent civil unrest in Mexico City, and the persuasions of a confessor.⁷² In the last two years of her life, Sor Juana renewed her vows upon the twenty-fifth anniversary year (1694) of when she had entered the convent, sold many of her books and other possessions, distributed the funds as alms, and undertook much less writing. In 1694, she penned a series of three mostly ritualized confessions, one of which was reputed to have been signed in blood, and famously declared herself: "the worst of all women" (*la peor de todas*).⁷³ According to her first biographer Calleja, at this time her once formidable library and collection of musical and scientific instruments was reduced to next to nothing, replaced with instruments of flagellation and repentance: "In her cell, she left no more than three books of devotion and several hair shirts and scourges."⁷⁴

One salient interpretation of these events, exemplified by the point of view of Mexican poet and cultural commentator Octavio Paz, is that Sor Juana, once a dazzling, independent intellect, finally submitted to ecclesiastical pressure to

⁷² Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 438-49.

⁷³ Timeline by Anna More in *Selected Works*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 313.

⁷⁴ Diego Calleja. "Approval of the Most Reverend Father Diego Calleja of the Society of Jesus" (1700). In *Selected Works* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Translated by Edith Grossman. Edited by Anna More. (New York: Norton, 2016), 195.

conform to a less public, repentant role as a more traditional nun—or as a “mute penitent” as Paz terms this stage of Sor Juana’s life.⁷⁵ Paz further declares these final years a “defeat” and states that: “The unfortunate last years of Sor Juana do not, as some of her commentators would have had us believe, give a new meaning to her work.”⁷⁶ It perhaps defies belief, however, that a seventeenth century woman in Mexico who had attracted international attention with her writings and faced down, in a public letter, criticism from the powerful Bishop of Puebla, was not continuing to exercise a degree of agency over her life and circumstances.

The most prominent fact that we know of this period from a nearly contemporaneous source⁷⁷ is that, in the last year of her life, Sor Juana was undertaking the medical care of her fellow sisters who had fallen victim to an epidemic of unknown type or origin:

The convent was infected by such a pestilential epidemic that out of ten nuns who fell ill, only one recovered. It was a very contagious disease. Mother Juana, compassionate by nature and zealously charitable, ministered to everyone, without tiring from the continuous effort or guarding herself from infection.⁷⁸

Whatever ecclesiastical or personal controversies may have swirled around Sor Juana at this time, she was also in a sense transcending her didactic medical knowledge by entering a clinical formation in her last year of life. Her

⁷⁵ Paz, *Sor Juana or, The Traps of Faith*, 488.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Calleja published this account of Sor Juana’s life in 1700; she had died in 1695.

⁷⁸ Diego Calleja, “Approval of the Most Reverend Father Diego Calleja of the Society of Jesus,” 196.

autodidactic knowledge of Galen and Aristotle, as exhibited in *El Primero Sueño*, would have been not unlike the education in Galenic medicine undertaken by academically trained physicians of her era in Spain and New Spain. This learning had been further informed by an engagement with the legacy of Vesalius and his human anatomical inquiries, undertaken as a form of literary human dissection behind the Jeronymite convent's walls, and exhibited prominently in the text of *El Primero Sueño*. It may not be entirely a flight of fancy to suggest that the Phoenix of Mexico entered her terminal apotheosis as not just an *otro galeno*, but as a new female Galen, embarking on a clinical pathway informed not just by the foundations of medicine of antiquity, but also by its modern reinvigoration by Vesalius and other proponents of human dissection. In this reading of Sor Juana's earthly ending, in contrast to Octavio Paz's stance, her final years are not a "defeat" but rather a self-sacrificing culmination of her autodidactic medical learning, steeped in antiquity but intersecting with modernity, then reaching a tragic and terminal clinical phase.

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