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Reseña / Review

Stephanie Kirk, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

The Gender Politics of Knowledge in New Spain

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Stephanie Kirk begins her engaging new book, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico*, by remarking that scholars agree to disagree when it comes to their readings of the life and works of the celebrated intellectual nun from New Spain. While the causes of the disagreements are many, I think it fair to say that *sorjuanistas* generally quarrel over minutia because they tend to engage once and again with the same extra-literary facts (or conjectures), not to mention pouring over the same works (or even lines!). Stephanie Merrim's *Early Modern Women and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (1999) was a much-needed comparative study that situated the nun in a wider international context of women writers. With her latest book, Kirk returns the focus to New Spain but equally advances the field by teaching us more about the intricacies, politics and machinations of Sor Juana's own world. By widening the scope with which we might situate the nun-writer's life and works in colonial Mexico's intellectual culture, its institutions, and its most powerful members culled from the ranks of the clergy, and particularly the Jesuits who dominated the

intellectual orbit, Kirk provides readers with a clearer picture of Sor Juana's audacity in trespassing on privileged male intellectual domains, as well as the motives of those who wanted to suppress the public circulation of her work. In suggesting that Sor Juana's corpus is like the hall of mirrors at Versailles, that is, a labyrinth-like space with seemingly never-ending possibilities, but also with destabilizing contrasts that reflect and challenge intellectual norms of her day, Kirk makes manifest how this complexity allows for the differing interpretations of her work, but also renewed approaches, such as her own. But the maze analogy holds best, as Kirk aptly shows, when Sor Juana's writing is read in relation to the circumstances in which it was produced and, fascinatingly, when her life and works are appraised not only in her literary milieu, but also in cultural, intellectual, political and religious contexts.

Tracing the course of Sor Juana life and the myriad scholarship on her can seem akin to putting together an incomplete jigsaw puzzle. While the recent discoveries of previously unknown texts by or about Sor Juana are exciting, there remains, as Kirk skilfully demonstrates, much work to be done in garnering a better understanding of her political and intellectual milieu. This can be accomplished, Kirk shows, by having a closer look at those who shared her world and, importantly, by drawing on multiple sources—both primary and secondary—from different domains that reach well beyond the literary to encompass cultural and intellectual history, and material—primarily print—culture. Indeed, literature in New Spain is subsumed into the larger and more decisive sphere of knowledge and Kirk suggests, as did Foucault, of course, that whomsoever possesses knowledge, wields power. Recognizing the gender dimension in this equation proves vital given that women, including the astonishing Mexican “Tenth Muse,” were traditionally excluded from the world of learning. While this line of thinking has been prevalent in Sor Juana studies for some time, Kirk cogently shows how barring women allowed the masculine intellectual elite to assert their hegemonic power. The Jesuits were particularly firm in creating a “male-only proto-public sphere of institutional culture” (8), a community of scholars built on formal education and the concomitant production of knowledge and high culture erudition, that was decidedly off limits for women.

They were not, however, invulnerable. In fact, Sor Juana, in both her life

and her writing, proved threatening precisely, Kirk argues, because she was able to engage in erudite culture without forming part of a closed masculine community. Following Elizabeth Rhodes, Kirk suggests that Jesuit subjectivity may have proved decisive for Sor Juana, especially in the way it intertwined piety and learning in the forging of a self through knowledge. For Kirk, Sor Juana uses her poetry and erudition to insert herself into the enclaves and institutions as well as into the discourses produced and promoted within these. As such, the Mexican nun-writer uses the constructed connection between religion, men and learning, as opposed to a “woman-centered” knowledge, to challenge her religious superiors and their institutions. Through Sor Juana’s work, Kirk aims to show the fragility of the city of knowledge’s foundational buildings—its institutionalized sites of learning and its discourses (3). This book, then, works to garner a better understanding of the contours of colonial religious masculinity and its role in the shaping of New Spanish intellectual culture—the site in which the gender politics of knowledge and culture in colonial Mexico are most clearly revealed.

In the discursive web that operates to exclude women from literary and intellectual production, an important thread is connecting acts of publishing by women to unseemly inappropriate public visibility. As is well known, Sor Juana breaks with all the rules in this regard. Kirk’s illuminating approach to colonial Mexico’s culture of knowledge and the reworking of the private-public dyad in its historical, literary and material contexts, allows us to further understand how and why she did so. Each of the book’s five chapters both examine and theorize on colonial Mexican intellectual culture through the institutions within which she and many of the most powerful male clerics and intellectuals operated. The chapters turn on libraries, anatomy and medicine, classical learning, publishing and printing, and spirituality.

Chapter one reads Sor Juana through the lens of self-representation of the cultured, male-only elite, in an approach that builds on feminist scholarship and borrows from studies in masculinities. The library is posited as the place and means in which the Hieronymite nun gained access into the male-centered intellectual world of her time. Interestingly, Sor Juana learns from her library but speaks not of it, presumably cognizant of the perception that books and bodies carry danger, insofar as untrained readers could be swayed by unorthodox material. Kirk outlines Sor Juana’s cautious relationship to her library in stark contrast with

that of Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza who gains prestige and power from his impressive collection of books. As a conjunction of public and private spaces that housed books understood to be symbols of knowledge and power, Sor Juana's library is what allowed her to fashion her own self in words. According to this suggestive reading, we come to understand that the loss of her library was not simply an admonishment from her religious superiors, but rather a strategic move in the tangled web of gender, power and knowledge spun by the cultured elite of late seventeenth century Mexico.

The second chapter of *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico* uses the Jesuits as a "fascinating case study for the examination of the conjunction of masculinity and education and thus the gendering of knowledge and learning in colonial Mexico" (62). Sor Juana's erstwhile confessor Núñez de Miranda serves as an example of how Jesuit educational institutions promoted the pursuit of knowledge through Christian humanism and religious orthodoxy. While it is commonplace to speak of how the nun-writer encroached on the male, public, intellectual domain, Kirk offers compelling evidence for exactly *how* she did so, first by studying three key elements that characterize the intersection between Jesuit education and what Kirk terms "its particular brand of colonial Mexican masculinity" (65): spectacle and public knowledge, masculine rivalries in the field of knowledge and, finally, male genealogies and Jesuit institutions; and, secondly by studying evidence previously overlooked, such as the significance of Sor Juana's production of Latin poetry. Kirk's contextualizing of Sor Juana's epigrams in the *Neptuno alegórico* situates the nun's challenge to the public-private divide in a context in which women virtually did not write in Latin because they did not have access to formal education. Barring women from educational institutions was meant to keep them at home (or in the convent) and free from sin as much as to preserve the power of the clergy who ultimately dictated every realm of women's lives.

Chapter three depicts a particular realm of knowledge, which, like others, women were banned from in the seventeenth century: the study of anatomy and medicine. Delving deeper into forms of learning through book and print culture, in this case devoted to the human body, Kirk delivers an original reading of Sor Juana's contemplations on the body as an instrument of the soul. Likely piqued by the notion that studying anatomy was aimed at acquiring a certain kind

of trustworthy knowledge, Sor Juana's explorations on the body could only be deductive, not experimental. Kirk's reading of the nun-writer's engaging with the body, mostly in *Primero sueño*, is framed in an interesting discussion of the porousness between science, literature and rhetoric in "literary discussions of poetically conceived bodies" (114).

The penultimate chapter reveals the domains of print and knowledge to be exclusively masculine, thus permitting further examination of the mentalities associated with elite male intellectual culture in colonial Mexico. Engaging with Sor Juana's *Crisis de un sermón*, better known as the *Carta atenagórica*, her questioning of the Jesuit Antonio de Vieira's interpretation of Christ's greatest gift to mankind, Kirk's perspective on the gender politics of knowledge offers new insights on a topic where for the most part consent now reigns. In her reading, the printing of the *Carta atenagórica*, including the admonishing *Carta de sor Filotea* that precedes it, is not a platform for Sor Juana to show her brilliance and irk the Archbishop of México, Núñez de Miranda, but a clear act of admonishment aimed at exposing her trespass on the part of Puebla's bishop Fernández de Santa Cruz. In Kirk's words, "[t]he gendering of print and knowledge and the congruent mentalities of elite male culture lies at the heart of my analysis of Fernández de Santa Cruz's actions." Her argument is convincing and one can't help but to think along with her that if the nun-writer's contestatory piece—that she never intended to be published—had remained in manuscript form and circulated only within a small group of friends, the backlash against her and her activities might never have taken place.

Drawing partly on her earlier work, in chapter five Kirk analyzes a variety of texts from different genres, all of which are male-authored, to demonstrate the New World Church's desire to fashion a rigidly conceived model of female piety—a gender politics of piety located in the convent—as a means to establish the orthodoxy and favour of its mission. Here, Kirk examines how examples of Sor Juana's work challenge prevailing masculine views "of the female path to the divine and the representation of the exemplary convent inhabitant as portrayed in these texts" (171). There are some welcome developments in this chapter, particularly in terms of Sor Juana's *villancicos* devoted to St. Catherine, in which Kirk argues that she reworks traditional notions of suffering and martyrdom. I am not entirely convinced that in so doing Sor Juana succeeds in "writing herself into the male

tradition of knowledge,” especially if it is by means of tracing direct connections between ideas expressed in these religious works and Sor Juana’s self-fashioning. Kirk’s reading of the potential bond between suffering and knowledge, nonetheless, is a provocative one that merits further exploration.

One aspect of the book that I found perplexing were the numerous mentions of the author’s discrepancies with the readings of Alejandro Soriano Vallès who wishes to rewrite Sor Juana as unfailingly devout almost as much as he aspires to censure contemporary scholars who overlook the nun’s piety. In my view, engaging in a debate with Soriano Vallès seems unproductive especially given Kirk’s rigorous scholarship that shows the nun’s self-fashioning to be carefully crafted in such a way that learning and devotion are not at odds with one another.

In my regard, Stephanie Kirk’s *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Gender Politics of Knowledge in Colonial Mexico* offers important and compelling insights into Sor Juana’s trespassing on male intellectual domains. The author consistently engages with other scholars’ work in highly productive ways and the wealth of sources, be they historical, literary or liturgical, offer up a more complete picture of the nun-writer’s world, her writing, as well as her motives for taking up, and ultimately abandoning, the pen. This book is a well-documented, remarkably thorough, multilayered, scholarly depiction of the gender politics of knowledge from within and without sor Juana’s keen and particular perspective. An engaging read filled with scholarly acumen, Kirk’s latest book is of enormous wealth for many: a must read for *sorjuanistas* and scholars and students alike who work from a gendered perspective on cultural history, book and print culture, masculine elites or piety during and beyond seventeenth century New Spain.