

feminist thoughts and actions. Mészáros is another one of these reluctant feminists. What, if not feminist, are claims like these: "What I want to work for is to help women become conscious of their being, the essence of their womanhood: this is what I want to express in my films, to make them aware of their own female personalities;" "Filmmaking by women represents a different kind of sensitivity. If you interpret my films as strictly political, you will see that I approach power relations differently from the way they are portrayed by male directors. Not because my films are necessarily better, or theirs worse, but because they are different."

Márta Mészáros, as portrayed by Catherine Portuges, is a real East European woman: self-sufficient yet reaching out to people, politically committed but also attentive to the individual, demanding but sensitive, living today's reality as a visionary.

### THE ANSWER/LA RESPUESTA: INCLUDING A SELECTION OF POEMS

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Critical ed. and trans. by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell. New York: The Feminist Press, 1994.

*by Joan Gibson*

Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramirez de Santillana was a seventeenth-century woman of New Spain whose most passionate commitment was to the life of the mind. Her fascinating defense of this choice, almost a physical necessity for her, is given in *The Answer*, virtually her last written work. Born illegitimate in Mexico probably in 1648, she learned to read soon after she learned to walk, and was in the habit of versifying every thing she said. She was almost entirely self-educated through reading in her grandfather's extensive library, de-

veloping lifelong interests in rhetoric, law, medicine, physics, mathematics, music, and literature. Even while cooking, she pondered the physical principles of food chemistry. By the age of seven she begged to be dressed in boy's clothing and sent to the university. Instead she continued her education in the library of the viceregal court in Mexico City, serving there as lady-in-waiting after 1664. A public display of her learning in an examination by the most learned men of the time brought her both renown and hostility. Five years later when her reluctance to marry and her commitment to study led her to enter the convent of San Jerónimo, she collected there one of the largest libraries of New Spain. Her memorable conversation and her amiable personality continued to attract the friendship and loyalty of many in the clergy and court, in addition to her community. Others had long been uncomfortable with Sor Juana's accomplishments and independent attitude toward male religious superiors. If her publication of secular poetry and political pagentry was an irritation heightened by her popularity, an excursion into theology provoked rage.

In 1690, Sor Juana complied with a request by the bishop of Puebla, and sent him her criticisms of a famous sermon by a powerful member of the Mexican clergy, with her clear and repeated instructions that it was a private correspondence. The bishop prefaced the critique with a letter which appeared to praise it extravagantly, and published it without her permission under the kind of grandiose title she often mocked as patronizing to women, "Letter Worthy of Athena." The preface was signed "Sor Filotea de la Cruz," a pseudonym previously used for a male religious director writing letters of spiritual direction to nuns. There, speaking as an admiring but concerned sister in religion, the bishop of Puebla urged Sor Juana to abandon all learning, especially secular learning, unless it served piety, which was to be pursued in a spirit of total obedience.

Sor Juana perceived in his hints of

the risk of damnation for overzealous nuns, a further hint of the threat of the Inquisition. Publicly humiliated, she responded to the feigned concern of the pretend nun in *The Answer*, which refutes the charges against her, challenges the implied violence, defends secular as well as sacred learning, and argues for the right of women to study and to teach—although tragically, self-censorship soon led her to deny herself these very rights. Using all the enormous resources at her disposal, she asserts the freedom of thought from dogmatism and prejudice, and the appropriateness of women's use of intellectual gifts. While keeping intact a deeply ironic appearance of the most submissive traditional femininity, she attacks the arrogance and ignorance of male critics, including the sexual masquerade of Sor Filotea. The result is a dizzying, exuberant display of erudition and emotion, the pain as palpable as the intelligence.

Arenal and Powell have done a superb job of fulfilling their goal to offer an accessible text together with the necessary background to unravel its intricately woven strands. They have kept to the forefront Sor Juana's own profound awareness of the gender issues surrounding her at court and in the convent; her sense of herself as a woman writer in a tradition of learned and wise women. While using contemporary feminist theory, they have shown scrupulous care in respecting the religious, cultural and political differences which separate her from modern concerns and thought forms. The lucid, well-organized introduction and helpful notes clear a path through the dense layers of meaning and literary forms which Sor Juana employs. The English translations of *The Answer* (33 pages) and the poems (14 pages) in the bilingual text, are stunning to read and are much enriched by their commentary. Sor Juana has been called "the first feminist of the New World." We are all fortunate to have such a foremother and this book is a worthy contribution to making her work more available to English readers.