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'The 'Mother of Missions': The Duchess of Aveiro's Global
Correspondence on China and Japan, 1674-1694

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Women not content with societal pressures sought to model themselves after women who were "breaking the mold" by exercising power and influence in the politics of European cities, as well as in the Americas and other colonial enterprises. An avid reader and participant in intellectual discourse in the Mexican vice-regal court, sor Juana Inés de la Cruz listed many women that she admired in her writings. In "La respuesta a sor Filotea," (1691; "Response to Sister Filotea") sor Juana cited Maria Guadalupe de Lencastre along with Queen Christina Alexandra of Sweden and the Countess of Villaumbrosa of Spain as three contemporary women whom she admired. While sor Juana has come to be significantly more well known than these women she lauded, an investigation into the reasons for the inclusion of Maria Guadalupe de Lencastre, the Duchess of Aveiro y Arcos, illuminates the life and work of a fascinating and powerful woman who was making decisions and negotiating global transactions during the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

While it is important to note that the duchess was the cousin of sor Juana's dear friend, Maria Luisa Manrique de Lara, the Marquise de la Laguna and wife of the Viceroy of Mexico, Tomas de la Cerda, it is not a surprise that sor Juana was also captivated with the duchess's extensive efforts supporting Jesuit missionaries. We know that the duchess was involved in mission work as early as 1674 when she facilitated access to the royal court for the Chaldean Christian priest, Elias Ibn Hanna Al-Mawsili. The duchess helped him gain an audience with Mariana of Austria in Spain, and she provided him with letters of introduction to the viceroy of Peru (Lunde 1) where he traveled to raise money for relief for his community. Ibn Hanna's accounts of his travels in America represent the earliest narratives of the Spanish colonization process written in Arabic and the Duchess of Aveiro had a significant hand in the effort.

The duchess encouraged and sustained the work of the Jesuits in the Americas and campaigned for the success of those who were committed to missionary success in the Pacific. These efforts were intertwined and the

letters and parcels that passed back and forth between the duchess and her missionary patrons often included additional correspondence and other materials. As I explored in detail in “Casting New Molds,” a package of correspondence traveling to the duchess in 1683 contained news of a variety of topics, including a letter from the Marquise to sor Juana about the birth of her child, the failure of the Manila Galleon and the sacking of the Veracruz harbor by pirates. In addition, the packet contained a message from Jesuit missionary Baltasar de Mansilla, who was stranded in Mexico waiting for transportation to Pacific Island missionary outposts. Mansilla explained that:

...the Manila Galleon has failed us this year...I have no chance to come to the aid of those missions for which I had already such abundant provisions...I express my profound gratitude for the decrees which I received through Fr. Manuel Rodriguez in order to promote in every way trade between the Philippines and the Marianas, as also the free transport of the supplies sent to the missionaries... (*Kino Writes to the Duchess* 145-149)

Mansilla continued that he had included a letter from a Jesuit missionary working in California, Padre Eusebio Kino, who would also become a regular correspondent of the duchess (*Kino Writes to the Duchess* 149). These strings of correspondence illustrate some of the strategies for moving the goods around the globe and the frustration at their limitations expressed by each of the correspondents, as well as the mechanics for presenting the letter from Kino to the duchess. She would receive at least twenty letters and reports from this Jesuit, including a plea that he be sent to work in China.

For today’s purposes, I would like to explore several items of correspondence related to missionary efforts in China and Japan. These include a letter by Father Jose Suarez describing the trip to Asia by Flemish missionary Anthony Thomas as well as several of the 21 letters written to the duchess by Father Thomas. Thomas was a skillful mathematician and astronomer like Kino, Ferdinand Verbiest, and several of the other Flemish Jesuits, and the leadership in the Asian world very much coveted their expertise.

In a letter dated December 1681, Suarez detailed some of the issues that

arose surrounding Thomas's preparations for his trip to the East. Suarez explained that while Thomas had permission from the Jesuit leadership to travel to Japan, the Japanese and Chinese "Procurators" (the officials who controlled trade and transportation to China and Japan) were convinced that the Jesuits in Rome did not understand the difficulty of this travel and they were impeding his clearance. Suarez reported Thomas's response to the hassles of the procurators: "this fervent Missionary retorted that the matter was being dealt with by the Council of State, and that His Highness would write to the Governor of India, to facilitate this journey, and that he would have the liberal assistance of the Duchess of Aveiro" (Aveiro 54-55). This was enough to convince the procurators to allow Thomas his mission. It seems that the "duchess's assistance" was quite persuasive.

Suarez offered further details including the fact that Thomas traveled on a Dutch ship dressed in Dutch lay clothing. He was convincing enough that he was taken as Dutch. Suarez also noted the fact that Thomas practiced his faith with fervor while aboard ship, saying novenas and hearing confessions (Aveiro 55-56). The Dutch were a constant worry to the missionaries, and several issues with the Dutch in Asia appear in Thomas's own letters to the duchess. In a letter written in 1679 or 80 before his departure, the missionary prepared a key to decode the messages he would send to his patron via Dutch ships. Thomas explained: "The name of Father Antonius Thomas will be Dominus Paul Brabant; the name for Father Adamus Weidenfield, my companion, Dominus Michael Van Mol" He continued, "Japan will be called Bengala; the Christians: merchants; the Christian faith: commerce; persecution=war; the martyrs=soldiers" With regard to the duchess, she would be known as "Maria Guadal" and the king's Father Confessor "Gabriel Fernan" Thomas then listed a series of symbols with the letters they would represent written above them. While two letters with the initials P.B. have been preserved, only one from October 31, 1683, has coded information, but that code does not match the key given here (Aveiro 58-59). The key to the existing letter has been lost. What is interesting here is that the duchess's participation is equal to that of the king's Father Confessor. She is privy to the code and to the information being sent in secret from the missions.

In another letter before departing, Thomas thanks the Procurator of China, Father Adrian Petrus on behalf of the Duchess for his help in securing Thomas's passage to the east. He must have sent the duchess a

copy as this letter is found with her other correspondence.

The excellent Lady Maria was very grateful for the favor which you procured for her; in it she recognizes the singular regard which the Portuguese Provinces possess for her, and she says that she will certainly not forget it when back in Portugal. ...she has in mind great designs for the Eastern Missions, which she told me yesterday and today. (Aveiro 60)

While Thomas was never able to gain entry into Japan, he did spend several years in Siam where he found favor with the king because of his mathematical talents. While in Siam, Thomas was able to connect with a Dutch merchant who would help him get his letters to the duchess.

In a letter from 1684 from Macao, the missionary described the process:

The letter I am writing is the third one which I have sent by Dutch mail this year...as the Prefect of the Dutch ships [Joannes Leewenson] ...shows me a singular friendship on account of the considerable services which have been rendered him [transporting goods for the missions?]....I thought that this opportunity should be used to make the Dutch route a secure one for our letters. He promised to send an answer from Europe within 18 months or bring it himself from Batavia. (Aveiro 69-70)

In January of 1685, Thomas was summoned to join Ferdinand Verbiest, at the Court of the Chinese emperor in Beijing. The Chinese Emperor sent two Mandarins to collect Thomas from Macao. This event spurred serious excitement for the Jesuit, which he reported to the duchess in the same year:

A Japanese ship has been driven here by storm manned by 12 Japanese. They have been received with the utmost kindness and generosity. They saw here the solemn entrance of the two Mandarins from Beijing and the mandate of the Emperor to conduct me to the Court, me, with whom they had been talking with familiarity while I was dressed in the habit of our Society.

They have been sent back to Nagasaki in a splendidly furnished Portuguese ship. (Aveiro 70-71)

Several days later, Thomas added to his letter still inspired by his witness to the first Portuguese ship to Nagasaki. He closed with a request of the duchess. He asked her to send him a timepiece that showed minutes and seconds like the ones that were made in Paris at the time, as well as a spyglass as the Chinese Emperor had requested these (Aveiro 70-71).

In a letter dated 1685 from Thomas's superior, Ferdinand Verbiest offered his appreciation for the duchess's efforts and explained that he read one of her letters to the Chinese emperor and lauded her as "the Most Excellent Muse of all the liberal arts, whose company is eagerly sought for by Philosophy itself and by all Mathematical Sciences" (Aveiro 83).

Another letter from Thomas written to the duchess in 1687 hinted at problems between the Jesuits and the Pope's Holy Congregation that had "made the Fathers of our Society averse to the missions." Thomas apologized for the lack of correspondence with the duchess and explained that this would be "made good by the letter that I sent to the French-Belgium provincial, which will be forwarded to you by the Dutch route, ...and by the monthly reports that I am sending to our Father, requesting him to forward them to you. One copy of these, rather than the original, down to January, I sent to you this year in February by the Manila route" (Aveiro 72-73). It seems in this letter that correspondence had become less reliable as well, but this does illustrate the fascinating manner in which news travelled from such distant outposts, as well as the importance of the duchess having access to the intimate details of the operations.

A letter from Thomas from 1694 reiterated the important role the duchess played in the successes in China. In 1692, the Emperor declared freedom of religion in the realm. According to Thomas "new churches have been erected everywhere without fear and the Divine Law is propagated, but how greatly the strengths of the few missionaries is taxed. We hope to get more workers from Father Thyrsus Gonzalez, but only eight have arrived" (Aveiro 73).

Success was sweet, but with the vastness of China before them, the small but influential cadre of Jesuits knew they would need the duchess's continued support to succeed. The duchess campaigned in court, with the religious hierarchy, and in the commercial arena for open trade between the

Pacific colonies and for support of missions around the globe. The letters written to Maria Guadalupe de Lencastre by Jesuits throughout the world illuminate the duchess's work as a successful, entrepreneurial patron for nearly thirty years. We are just beginning to understand the power she wielded and the impact she made on the Jesuit missionary enterprises. Fortunately, sor Juana Inés de la Cruz knew this and left us clues about the duchess's work!

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