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THE MIRROR-SHIELD OF SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ¹

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Introduction

The tower of the Rectoría stands in the centre of the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. On an upper floor, in the office of the rector of the university, to which restricted access is protected by a guard and a bullet-proof air lock, hangs the most iconic portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Figure 3.1).² What makes this life-size portrait particularly fascinating besides its restricted visibility and the adventurous itinerary required to see it, is that it is the oldest painted portrait of the great New Spanish poet of the seventeenth century still conserved. Signed ‘Miranda fecit’ and dated, according to a lost inscription, 1713, it represents the creole nun in conformity with the codes of court portraiture in the Spanish Hapsburg world: she is standing, dressed in her Jeronymite habit, and framed by a hanging drapery of crimson velvet and some few pieces of furniture – a *bufete*, or desk, and a chair (Gállego 1968: 210–216; Bodart 2011: 237–241). The specificity of her intellectual persona is nonetheless defined by the books on the shelves in the background, the volumes of her writings and the poem she is composing on the table, and the long biographical inscription in the foreground relating her exceptional life and character from her birth as Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez in the village of San Miguel Nepantla in ‘1651’ (in fact 1648) to her death in the Jeronymite convent of Mexico in 1695. The painting, the author of which has been identified as Juan de Miranda, active at the vice-regal court from around 1694 to 1714, is certainly less refined in its pictorial quality than the larger and more ambitious portrait made for the Jeronymite convent by the acclaimed Miguel Cabrera in 1750, which represents Sor Juana Inés sitting at her desk and expands her library from twenty-three to sixty volumes on the shelves (Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Historia, Castillo de Chapultepec). Miranda’s painting nonetheless shares the same illustrious



FIGURE 3.1 Juan de Miranda (attr.), *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 1713, oil on canvas, Dirección General del Patrimonio, UNAM, Mexico City.

origin, according to its identification with the model described in the inscription on the cartouche at the bottom of Cabrera's portrait as hanging in the counting house of the Jeronymite convent, which was a donation of Sor María Gertrudis de San Eustaquio, the spiritual daughter of Sor Juana Inés and her successor in the role of accountant to that conventual institution.³

If Miranda's painting is posthumous, as are all the other known painted portraits of Sor Juana Inés, this connection to Sor Maria Gertrudis, and therefore to the context of the lifetime of the nun poet, provides it with an aura of authenticity. It gives the painting the status of *vera effigies*, as stated by the very opening of the long biographical inscription which defines it *fiel copia*:

Faithful copy of the famed woman who was admirable in all sciences, faculties, arts, different languages with all perfection, and among the chorus of the major Latin and Castilian poets of the world, for what her singular and egregious numen produced in her excellent and celebrated works: Mother Juana Inés de la Cruz, Phoenix of America, glorious achievement of her gender, honor of the nation of this new world and reason of admiration and praise from the old one [...]⁴

This primacy also makes Miranda's painting the first testimony of perhaps one of the most intriguing elements of Sor Juana Inés's representation: the extremely large nun-badge, decorated with an image of the Annunciation, that she wears on her scapular (Figure 3.2). This defines her as belonging to the Jeronymite order but also evokes, through its extraordinary size and its position just below the chin, the bodily constriction of her conventual life. This striking oversized medallion was in fact a common attribute of a nun's habit in early modern Mexico, where it was known since the late seventeenth century as an *escudo de monja* – literally a nun's shield. The portraits of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz have been the object of much attention, from the essays of Octavio Paz and Francisco de la Maza, who have emphasized the extraordinary character of the poet, to the studies of Alma Montero Alarcón and James M. Córdova, who consider the status of her image in the larger context of conventual portraiture in New Spain (Maza 1952; Muriel and Romero de Terreros 1952; Paz 1988; Toussaint 1990:–144–145; Burke in *Mexico: Splendors* 1990: 351–356; Burke 1992: 119–125; Perea and Paz 1994; Scott 1995; Tapia Méndez 1995; Sartor 1998; Montero Alarcón 2003; Ruiz Gomar in Pierce, Ruiz Gomar and Bargellini 2004: 206–210; Prendergast 2007; Perry 2012; Córdova 2014; Vanessa Lyon 2017). Moreover, Elizabeth Perry's investigations have contributed greatly to the



FIGURE 3.2 Detail of Juan de Miranda (attr.), *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 1713, oil on canvas, Dirección General del Patrimonio, UNAM, Mexico City.

clarification of the history of the *escudos de monjas* (1999, 2007). Yet, the puzzling visual effect of the medallion in Sor Juana Inés' portrait has not really been addressed: the present essay intends to investigate this aspect within the wider frame of the hermeneutics of early modern portraiture, analysing both the role of the badge in the fashioning of the nun poet self-image and its function in the economy of the composition of her painted portraits.

Circled by an oval frame, the painted surface of the medallion has the same dimensions as the sitter's face; placed just under and in contact with the chin, the nun-badge operates a doubling of the shape of the face, suggesting a visual association with a mask which, sliding downward, would unveil the individual's physiognomy or, sliding upward, would cover it with the image of the social *persona*. *Sua cuique persona* – to each his own mask, states the *motto* associated with a mask on the painted cover attributed to Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio that, sliding laterally, would have unveiled underneath the portrait of a Florentine lady (*La Monaca*, 1510, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence) (Bolzoni 2008: 55–63, 2010: 129–135; Stoichita 2019: 148–150). The peculiar arrangement of portraits with covers juxtaposes two images of the self, one physiognomic (the portrait) and the other allegoric or emblematic (the cover), emphasizing the duplicity of the act of portraiture in the early modern period, when the portrait was expected to simultaneously represent the individual likeness and the social persona (Pommier 1998: 128–152; Bodart 2011: 128–144). In the portrait of Sor Juana Inés, the medallion which attracts the same visual attention as the face by the similarity of its size, its frontality and its juxtaposition to it, may belong to the same figurative register, but it operates in a more complex way as it also introduces the process of repetition within the composition of the whole painting.

In fact, in the portrait, the framed Annunciation on the medallion creates an image within an image, or more precisely a painting within a painting, a repetitive process known as *mise-en-abyme* since it was defined effectively by André Gide in 1893 (Gide 1948: 41; Dällenbach 1989: 7–19). Gide was borrowing the concept of *abyme* from the – invented – heraldic figure of the blazon within the blazon, in order to theorize the literary figure of the narrative within the narrative, that he famously compared to the reflected image produced by convex mirrors in early Netherlandish painting. In his broad understanding of the process encapsulating *en abyme* a work of art within a work of art, at the scale of its characters, Gide emphasizes how this repetition in small size, through an effect of condensation and intensification, unveils the general structure and meaning of the work: 'Nothing sheds more light on the work or displays the proportions of the whole work more accurately'.⁵ Sor Juana Inés's medallion, figurative double of her individual likeness and reduced image of her social identity, positioned *en abyme* at the heart of her portrait, potentially reveals the conception of the general composition. The process is further complicated by the fact that the medallion is worn on her body and therefore creates a direct interaction between the pictorial representation and its principal character. As stated by Alfred Gell in his fundamental work on Polynesian tattoos, *Wrapping in*

Images, the images on the body, encapsulated on the second skin of the wearer, participate in the constitution of his social persona, as a means of conducting social relationships (Gell 1993: 1–39). Those images are not to be understood only as ornaments displayed on the body and covering it, but also as a projection of its interiority, based upon the double-sidedness of the skin. Gell calls here upon the work of Didier Anzieu on *Le Moi-peau* (*The Skin-ego*), who considers that the skin simultaneously protects the inner cavity of the body and communicates its internal state to the external world (Anzieu 1985). On this basis, Gell defines the basic schema of tattooing as ‘the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior’ (Fleming 1997: 37–38; Caplan 2000: xii–xiii). Reframed within the practice of wearing images, the medallion of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz can be understood as a constitutive element of her social persona that is not only an exterior image embedded in her body, but also a projection of her inner self displayed on it (Bodart 2018). Moreover, I will argue that in the economy of her painted portrait, the repetitive reduction operated by the image positioned *en abyme* on her body, which it covers and reveals simultaneously, works as a metaphoric mirror of the nun as poet.

The mirror-shield

The frontispiece of the second volume of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s works, published in Seville in 1692, bears a portrait of the author, the only known image dated from her lifetime (Figure 3.3). In this print engraved by Gregorio Fosman y Medina after a drawing by the Sevillian painter Lucas Valdés, the half-length portrait, framed in an oval medallion, is crowned by the figures of Hermes and Athena, while in the upper part of the sheet the personification of Fame, playing bugle, is spreading the sitter’s reputation. On the pedestal supporting the oval portrait, a Latin inscription advises: *Virginis en vultus cernisquam nulla per orbem ingenio maior vel pietate fuit* / ‘Note well the face of this virgin, for nowhere in the world will you find someone better in talent and piety’ (Prendergast 2007). Nonetheless, ‘the face of the virgin’ is rather generic in the print and, besides the inscription that unfolds her identity on the oval frame – *La M[adr]e Juana Ynes de la Cruz monxa professa en el comb[en]to de S[an] Geronimo de Mexico* – the clues to recognize her as the famed nun and poet are mainly her monastic dress and the plume that she holds in her hand, which leans on the border of the frame and illusionistically seems to pop out of it. However, the oval nun-badge that she wears on her scapular, which is white instead of black, is rather regular in size and bears the familiar silhouette of the Immaculate Conception instead of the Annunciation in the center. Lucas Valdés could plausibly have elaborated his drawing from a portrait – perhaps a miniature – brought from Mexico by the former vicereine of New Spain María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, countess of Paredes, who became the patron and friend of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz during her stay in Mexico from 1680 to 1686 and took

care of the publication of her works once she came back to Spain (Maza 1952; Perry 1999). The Sevillian painter may thus have adapted that model for a European audience, reducing the size of the nun-badge to the more contained dimensions that characterized the habit of the Conceptionist order in Spain, as seen for example in a group portrait of five Conceptionist nuns of the convent of Santa Úrsula of Alcalá de Henares painted by Juan Carreño de Miranda in 1653 (Figure 3.4) (López Vizcaino and Carreño 2007: 402–403).

Since the foundation of the Conceptionists in Toledo by Santa Beatriz de Silva and under the patronage of Queen Isabel of Castile in 1484, the rules of the order stated that the nuns had to wear the image of their patron, the Immaculate Conception, as a gold and enamel medallion, called *venera*, over their heart, as well as an embroidered patch on the shoulder of their cape (Perry 1999: 49). In Mexico, this distinctive medallion of the Conceptionists was also associated with the habit of the orders derived from them, mainly the Jeronymites and the Augustinians. In other words, the badge was related to the wealthier, higher status and less austere unreformed convents of the creole elite, which allowed the nuns to have private rooms and semi-independent households (Muriel 1946: 251–301, 1994; Amerlinck de Corsi and Ramos Medina 1995;

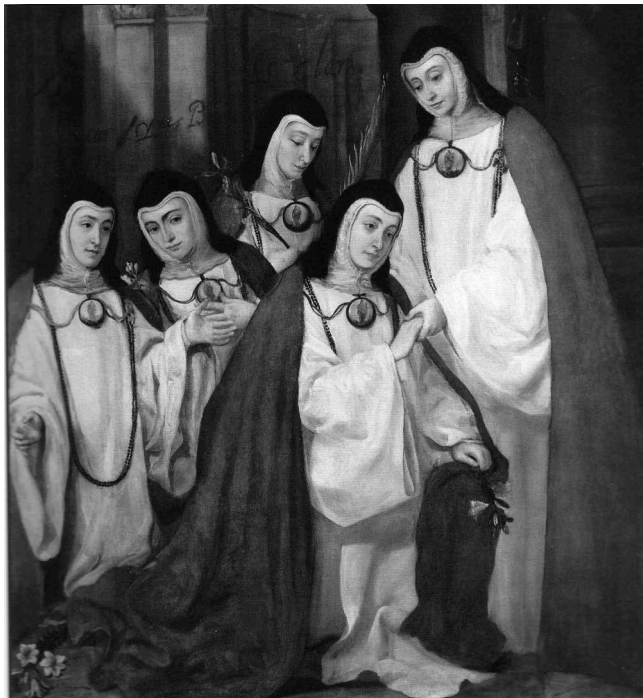


FIGURE 3.4 Juan Carreño de Miranda, *Five Conceptionist Nuns*, 1653, oil on canvas, Convento de Santa Úrsula, Alcalá de Henares.

Perry 1999: 11–43). The impressive size of the medallions in New Spain was a response to the post-Tridentine reform of the monastic dress imposed in 1635 by the archbishop of Mexico Francisco Manso y Zúñiga, who prohibited nun-badges made of luxurious materials, such as ‘gold, precious stones, or enamel’.⁶ While cheaper materials were therefore used for the production of the *escudos*, which were painted on vellum or copper, framed with light indigenous tortoise shell, the lack of luxury was compensated with an incredible increase in size. The nun-badges expanded as much as it was feasible for an image to be worn on the body, from around seventeen to twenty centimetres in diameter, and became rather uncomfortable to bear, in this way conveying both a sense of ostentation and of discipline. According to the rules of the order of the Immaculate Conception which were partially reformed by Manso y Zúñiga, while the badge could be removed to sleep and to work, it had to be worn in all community spaces, such as the choir, the chapter and the parlor, where it was therefore addressed to an exterior gaze. However, the purpose of the image on the medallion had an internal dimension most of all, as it was a constant reminder to the nuns of their practice of the imitation of the Virgin:

Traese esta imagen, para que sepan las professas desta santa Religion, que an de tener á la Madre de Dios, y Reyna de los Angeles impressa en su coraçon, y traerla siempre delante de los ojos como dechado [...]

(*Manso y Zúñiga 1635: 4v, cit. and transl. in Perry 1999: 75, n.25*)

this image is worn so that the professed of this holy religion know that they have to have the Mother of God and Queen of the Angels impressed in their heart and carried always before their eyes as model [...]

The medallion therefore stands at the interface between the exterior vision of the Immaculate Conception and the internal image situated in the heart, visualizing the mystic process of the meditative prayer (Stoichita 1995: 45–77). The theme of the sacred image internally impressed finds its roots in the interior stigma received by mystic nuns, such as the Umbrian Clare of Montefalco, whose autopsy after her death in 1308 revealed the shape of Crucifix and the *Arma Christi* in her heart⁷ (Flansburg 1994). As evidence of extraordinary piety and direct contact with the divine, the interior stigma could be displayed in the posthumous portraits of ‘exemplary’ nuns: Sor Anna de San Francisco, prioress of the Dominican convent of Saint Catherine in Mexico City, is depicted as Saint Catherine of Siena holding the lily, while the delicate cut of the tunic at her side uncovers exactly where Saint Catherine received one of her stigmata, the image of the Nativity impressed in her heart (Museo del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, post 1635, Figure 3.5) (Franco 1900: 470–479; Lavrín 2008: 159–160). Considered in this frame, the medallion of the Conceptionist nuns worked simultaneously as an example of religious virtue that covered and defined the body and as a visual projection of an inner image that was revealed on the body.



FIGURE 3.5 Anonymous (Mexico), *Sor Anna de San Francisco*, after 1635, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico.

This dual dimension is inherent to the long history of the practice of wearing images, which in the early modern period functioned essentially through props, such as medallions, badges and jewels, as well as embroidered and painted textiles, or engraved and embossed pieces of armor⁸ (Bodart 2018). The direct contact with the body, as well as the visual inscription of the image onto its surface, builds up a close relationship between the wearer and what is represented on the image, a relationship that has on the one hand an intimate dimension, because of the physical closeness, and on the other hand a social extension, because of its public display. The images represented are generally figures related to a sense of identity and belonging: the patron saint, the dynastic family and the beloved pair, but also the broader social family, including the house of the princely patron or the intellectual circle. Inscribed on the body, the images visualize the ties between the wearer and the figure represented in terms of love, loyalty, faith, devotion; establishing social relations and acting continuously upon their wearers, those images are artefacts with agency (Gell 1998; Osborne and Tanner 2007: 1–28). They are activated through their contact with the body, and they are engaged in a performative process, through their bodily display and manipulation, which can hide and reveal, as in the case of portrait miniature medallions enclosed in locket pendants (Kelly 2007; Koos 2014, 2018). Holy images moreover introduce an apotropaic dimension, as can be seen in an extreme way with the mirror badges that the pilgrims used to capture, through

reflection, something of the supranatural properties of miraculous images and relics (Bruna 2006). On the breastplates of battlefield armour, the sacred images of the Virgin, the Crucifix or the patron saint are being worn on the heart as an expression of devotion, as a prayer for protection, and as a talisman for salvation. Covering the body, those images simultaneously reveal something of its interiority, projecting and displaying the 'image impressed on the heart': a panel of a small miracle altarpiece, depicting the *Victory of King Louis I of Hungary against the Turks* (1377), painted in 1512 for the sanctuary of the Virgin of Mariazell in Styria, visualizes this theme with particular eloquence (Graz, Landesmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie; Figure 3.6) (Becker 2005: 72–77, n° 24). On the targe affixed on the breastplate of the Christian king, the bright image of the Virgin is simultaneously the reflection of her apparition in the sky, and the projection of the devotional inner image of Louis I who devoted his battle to the Virgin of Mariazell, as attested by her image on the banner born by his cavalry.

Generally referred in inventories as *imágenes, placas, or medalliones del pecho*, the New Spanish nun-badges are also mentioned as *escudos*, at least from the late seventeenth century, that is to say when they reach their oversize dimensions and come again under the scrutiny of the ecclesiastic authority because of their contribution to the lavishness of monastic dress (Perry 1999: 46, 90). Scholars such as Perry or more recently Bradley James Cavallo have proposed recognizing native roots in such a specific expansion of the chest medallion, with references



FIGURE 3.6 School of the Danube Region, *Victory of Louis I of Hungary Against the Turks* (1377), panel of the Small Miracle Altar of Mariazell, 1512, tempera on panel, Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Alte Galerie.

to the square pectoral ornament embroidered on the *huipiles* (blouses) of women of the Aztec nobility, or to the obsidian mirror worn in religious rituals by women embodying Aztec goddesses (Perry 1999: 81–83; Cavallo 2017: 165–171). The terminology *escudo*, which is related both to the coat of arms – *escudo de armas* – as insignia defining identity, and to the shield as protective piece of armour, may also suggest cross-cultural reminiscences of the Aztec *chimallis*, the shimmering round feather mosaic shields that protected high ranking warriors through the power of magical ornament, while simultaneously defining dignity and deeds (Bruhn de Hoffmeyer 1986: 44–48; Salas 1986; Gruzinski 1992: 121–124). The status of *Nachleben* that the survival of Aztec motives may give to the *escudo de monja* is an issue that would merit further investigation, also taking into consideration the fact that, more broadly, the large pectoral medallion is a distinctive *leitmotif* of sacred iconography in early modern New Spain. Personifications of Christian virtues bear oversize pendants of pure crystal; the three figures of the anthropomorphic Trinity have distinctive figurative medallions with the sun, the lamb and the dove; archangels bear the radiant monogram of the name of Christ on their breastplate; and the same radiant monogram, intertwined to the image of Jesus, glows on the vestment of Saint Ignatius in his apotheosis in heaven. The armoured Moses painted by Cristóbal de Villalpando in his monumental *Moses and the Brazen Serpent, and the Transfiguration of Jesus* for a chapel of the Cathedral of Puebla in 1683 is among the most striking examples. While the leonine pauldron makes reference to the model of the early modern European armour *alla romana*, the round medallion embedded on the metallic surface of the breastplate is unusual to that tradition: it has the size and the shape of an *escudo de monja* and bears the image of the Annunciation. The typological tradition commonly associated Moses and the Annunciation through the interpretation of the episode of the burning bush as a prefiguration of the virginal birth of Christ. In Villalpando's painting, the prefiguration of the Incarnation is revealed on the body of the prophet and unfolded on the upper part of the canvas in the episode of the Transfiguration (Figure 3.7).⁹

The *escudo* intended as ornate piece of armour covers the body with apotropaic images of protection, while it expresses through its figurative composition inner virtues of its wearer, such as martial identity and warfare skills of the warrior (Quondam 2003; Stoichita 2012, 2016; Stoichita 2019: 198–215). The shield can furthermore convey these values through the brilliance of its polished metal: in the Homeric epic, the dazzling brightness of the shield, refracting the light of the asters, blinds the enemy from afar while expressing the *ménos*, the martial inner fire of the hero (Vernant 1998: 40). An illustration of the medieval treatise on warfare *Bellifortis*, completed in 1405 by the physician Conrad Kyeser, thematizes this effect: a warrior in full armor blinds his enemy reverberating the rays of sunlight through the polished targe affixed on his armor (Terjajian 2019: 74–75, n° 8). Similarly to the image of the Virgin of Marizell both reflected and projected by the armoured body of King Louis I of Hungary, the



FIGURE 3.7 Detail of Cristóbal de Villalpando, *Moses and the Brazen Serpent, and the Transfiguration of Jesus*, 1683, oil on canvas, Cathedral of Puebla, Puebla.

martial fire is here both reflected from Heaven and projected by the body of the warrior. However, in this context, the ancient martial furor is purified in the armour of light of the Christian knight, which was described by Saint Paul in his epistles; a metaphoric armour in which, significantly, the shield stands for Faith that defeats the burning arrows of the devil (Paul, *Epistle to the Romans*, 13, 12; *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 6, 13–17. See Wang 1975: 65–74). Moreover, because of its shape and its polished surface, the shield is also a piece of armour that is very closely related to the mirror, since the shield of Athena on which the offensive head of the Medusa was to be integrated through the reflective image. In early modern iconography, the shield often stands for the mirror in the hands of the allegories of Prudence, Wisdom or Time, offering the vision of the divine or an *exemplum virtutis* through its reflection (Hartlaub 1951). The New Spanish *escudo de monja* could operate both as a shield of faith defending the nuns from evil, and as a mirror of virtue: worn on their body, over their heart, it stands at the interface between the inner image of virginal virtue, which the nuns hold in their heart, and their external social image that they fashioned mirroring the model of the Virgin Mary, *speculum sine macula*.

The other side of the mirror

If the *escudo de monja* works as a metaphoric shield and a mirror of virtue, to what extent can it activate a process of *mise-en-abyme* when represented in a portrait of a nun? In other words, can it ‘shed more light on the work’ and ‘display the proportions of the whole work more accurately’, as the optical round and convex mirror does in early Netherlandish painting according to Gide? In the foundational example of Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait (London, National Gallery, 1434), the convex mirror effectively contributes to revealing the broader proportions of the whole on multiple levels (Belting and Kruse 1994: 155 n°49–50). By reflecting ‘the interior of the room in which the action of the painting takes place’, it unveils its structure, completing the image and its narrative by showing the other side of the room, including two characters otherwise imperceptible, standing in the doorway in front of the portrayed couple.¹⁰ Moreover, the mirror reveals the ‘backstage’ area of the painting’s production and reception, not only emphasizing the technical skills of the painter and inviting the beholder to appreciate them in their smallest figurative and textural details at close sight, but also referring to the process of the pictorial act and the act of seeing (Chastel 1978; Arasse 1984; Stoichita 1999: 248–264). The two anonymous characters reflected in the mirror are placed on the one hand in the position of the painter or the beholder in front of the painting, and on the other hand in the role of witnesses of the scene painted in the painting, a scene that is re-enacted through the painting, every time it is looked at. The mirror furthermore reveals the conception of pictorial representation proper to the painter and to a broader cultural and historical context: here, the continuity of pictorial space defines the painting as a fragment of an imagined wider vision that goes beyond the material limits of the painted surface. When worn on the body, the image *en abyme* can become even more complex, because it is activated through the inscription on the second skin of one of the main characters of the representation. In Hans Memling’s diptych of the Madonna in the Rose Garden (Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Figure 3.8), the reflection on the breastplate of Saint George reveals the continuity of the space between the material division of the two panels: while the Virgin and the Child surrounded by angels are depicted in the left-hand side panel, and the donor with Saint George on the right-hand side one, the polished steel surface of the armor reflects all the figures in the same unified landscape (De Vos 1994: 312–315 n°87). Thus, the reflection worn by the saint patron on his body visualizes how through his active intercession, the donor in prayer is brought in the mental vision of his devotional exercise to the presence of the Virgin (Falkenburg 2006). The reflected image appears here at the intersection between the temporality of the broader narrative and the acting body of its protagonist.

In the portraits of the Conceptionist nuns in Mexico the *escudo* activates similarly an image *en abyme* of the whole composition, opening towards a broader dimension. In the vice-royal court of New Spain, the nuns were usually



FIGURE 3.8 Hans Memling, *Diptych of the Madonna of the Rose Garden with Saint George and a donor*, 1480, oil on panel, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

portrayed to commemorate the ritual of their profession, when they received the crown, the palm and the candle as brides of Christ, becoming *monjas coronadas* – crowned nuns (Montero Alarcón 2003; Hammer 2004; Montero Alarcón 2008; Córdova 2014). A last image was to be taken on their death-beds, when they were adorned once more with their attributes as brides of Christ, in order to be buried with them, with the exception of their nun-badge that was kept separately. The profession portraits of the Conceptionists, such as the one of Sor María Ignacia Candelaria de la Santísima Trinidad (Tepotzotlán, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Figure 3.9), are particularly striking because the Immaculate Conception painted on the *escudo* operates a process of reduction and repetition of the portrayed nun who is dressed up as a Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, with a blue cape on the white dress, a crown on her head, and a doll of the infant Jesus in her hand. The nun therefore embodies the model of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception as an example of virtue, and in this context the surface of the mirror-shield is the recipient both of the ideal reflection of the wider dimension of the vision of the Immaculate Conception in heaven, and the projection of her virginal image interiorly impressed on the heart of the nun. The conjunction of this dual image on the mirror-shield reveals both the active devotional practice of *imitatio virginis* that conforms the body of the crowned nun to her virginal model, and the constant presence of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception beside her.

The *Mystical City of God*, painted by Cristóbal de Villalpando for the convent of Guadalupe, Zacatecas, 1706, allows one to clarify this visual construction (Figure 3.10) (Gutiérrez Haces et al. 1997: 317–319 n°107; Perry 1999: 111–112). Sitting in the foreground, Saint John the Evangelist and María de Jesús de Ágreda are taking notes in their manuscripts about the vision of the City of God that unfolds in the background, above which the Virgin of the Apocalypse is received in Heaven by the Trinity, an iconography that traditionally conflates with the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Compared to the treatment of the portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz by Lucas Valdés in the frontispiece of the second volume of her works, the process now appears inverted, as the brush of Villalpando adapts the image of the famed Spanish mystic author and Conceptionist abbess to the New Spanish audience by enlarging her nun-badge considerably. In the iconography of her portraits produced in the Iberian Peninsula, such as the engraving by I. F. Leonardo that illustrates the edition of her *Mística Ciudad de Dios* published in Madrid in 1688, María de Jesús de Ágreda wears a small round golden medallion on her scapular, while the Immaculate Conception appears in the background as the direct source of inspiration for her treatise. Villalpando brings this *venera* nearly to the size of an *escudo de monja*, an appropriation and adaptation justified by the miraculous, extracorporeal, journeys of María de Jesús de Ágreda in New Spain (Pierce, Ruiz Gomar and Bargellini 2004: 154–159). While the mystic writer, raptured by her divine inspiration, has the eyes turned upwards, the medallion, framing the figure of the Virgin that appears in Heaven, reveals how her internal vision of the Immaculate Conception is



FIGURE 3.9 Anonymous (Mexico), *Profession portrait of Sor María Ignacia Candelaria de la Santísima Trinidad*, after 1661, oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán, Mexico.

connected to the realm of Heaven. This conception of the image worn on the chest as a junction between the reverberation of the heavenly vision and the projection of the inner image of the heart has in fact a broad diffusion in the early modern New Spanish culture, and traces of the mystical dimension of these mirroring principles are interestingly to be found in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's poems.¹¹

Among the representations of the *monjas coronadas*, the portraits of Sor Juana Inés stand apart as they are not profession nor funerary portraits, a privilege generally reserved for the founders of convents. Moreover, her *escudo de monja* does not depict the Immaculate Conception, as was also common among the Jeronymites, but an Annunciation. Thus, the medallion, placing the image of a woman with a book – to speak in pre-iconographic terms – on the heart of the nun poet,



FIGURE 3.10 Cristóbal de Villalpando, *The Mystical City of God*, 1706, oil on canvas, Museo de Guadalupe, Guadalupe, Zacatecas.

operates a *mise-en-abyme* within the economy of the composition of her portraits, which systematically represent her writing, reading or holding a book. The origin of the *escudo* with an Annunciation is unclear: among the examples still conserved today, all attributable to the Jeronymite order, none predate the epoch of Sor Juana Inés with certainty, which would suggest that they were inspired by her model. The material that survives from the seventeenth century is nonetheless so

fragmentary that it is difficult to make a definitive case of the absence of previous examples. However, the portrait of Sor Juana Inés printed on the frontispiece of the second volume of her works in 1692, which represents her with a medallion of the Immaculate Conception, may also suggest that she chose to replace it with an Annunciation after 1686, the date of the plausible model of the print.

In her attempt to reconstruct the figure of Sor Juana Inés as a miniature painter, whose complete education at the vice-royal court would have also included drawing, Elizabeth Perry argues that she may have painted the medallion herself (Perry 2012). Certainly, the figure of a nun-painter would not have been unusual, as the convent was one of the few institutional contexts where women could develop an artistic practice, particularly in miniature painting. The idea of Sor Juana Inés as skilled in all arts including painting is a long lasting one, as already Miguel Cabrera, in his portrait of the nun poet in 1750, inserts two treatises on painting – the *Arte de la Pintura* by Francisco Pacheco and a mysterious *Gloria del Pincel* – among the volumes of her library. The persistent ghost of a lost self-portrait, attesting to the personal, intimate involvement of Sor Juana Inés in the self-fashioning and transmission of her own image, appears in a half-length portrait by Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas, the inscription of which paraphrases the previous one of the painting by Miranda, transforming it to ‘Faithful copy of another one that the Reverent Mother Juana Inés de la Cruz, phoenix of America, did of herself and painted with her own hand’ (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Figure 3.11). In 1952, Francisco de la Maza, while considering the painting a forgery without being aware of the signature of Vargas that would be later revealed by x-ray examinations, correctly observed that no contemporary sources of Sor Juana Inés attested to her practice as painter: the pictorial references in her poetry are formulated as metaphors for writing, while her biographers, such as her spiritual father Antonio Nuñez de Miranda and the Jesuits Diego Calleja and Antonio Oviedo, who praise her skills in several arts such as music, mathematics and astronomy, are totally silent about any activity as a painter (Maza 1952; Bantel and Burke 1979: 112–114 n°36; Tapia Méndez 1995). The inscription on Vargas’ painting, without being a fake, therefore attests to the construction of the myth of Sor Juana Inés during the eighteenth century, by including among the many skills of the Mexican Phoenix also the paradigmatic figure of the painter-poet.

Although the fascinating hypothesis of Sor Juana Inés as painter of her own image, recently revived by Perry, remains unfortunately speculative, the specificity of the choice of the Annunciation for her *escudo*, and the way in which it activates an image *en abyme* within her portraits, suggests that the nun poet at least fashioned her own image conscientiously, in a very subtle way. She could have worked with a professional painter and, considering the dates, the context and the fame of the sitter, it would be tempting, but still speculative, to identify him with Cristóbal de Villalpando, the leading artist at the vice-royal court in those years.¹² Perry proposes reading the Annunciation in this context as an emblem of the Virgin Mother of the Incarnate Word, alluding to female



FIGURE 3.11 Nicolás Enríquez de Vargas, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, eighteenth century, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

intellectual activity. Sor Juana Inés, as all the cultural elite of seventeenth century Mexico, was extremely familiar with the world of emblems: she had several treatises of emblems in her library, by authors such as Andrea Alciati, Pierio Valeriano or Athanasius Kircher, which she used as references in her own writings, for example when she composed the *Neptuno Alegórico* for the triumphal entry in Mexico of the new viceroy, Tomás de la Cerda, Marquis of La Laguna, with his wife the countess of Paredes in 1680 (Davidson 2004: 352–395). Nonetheless, the emblematic mode is not sufficient to approach the image of her *escudo de monja*, not only because there are no clear elements, such as a textual motto, designating that the devotional image should be read as an emblem, but also because it does not consider how the image operates within the framework of display on the body.

In her choice to wear the image of the Annunciation on her heart, Sor Juana Inés elects the Virgin of the Incarnation, *Madre del Verbo*, praying in front of her

book, as her model of virtue, while, at the same time, she projects her own engagement with the book in the normative context of prayer and devotional practice. This devotional dimension offered an acceptable image for the contested intellectual activity of the nun whose gender prohibited her from exploring theology in her writings. The book, placed in a prominent position in the centre of the composition, also suggests another level of *imitatio virginis*: the Virgin as a poet. Sor Juana Inés was celebrated as ‘Única Poetisa, Musa Décima’ on the frontispiece on the *Inundación Castálida* (poetic flood), the first volume of her works published in Madrid in 1689 with a dedication to the countess of Paredes. The same epithet was commonly used in Mexico to celebrate the Virgin Mary, called *Décima Musa María Santísima* (Maza 1980: 45–48). The *escudo de monja* of Sor Juana Inés played with the ambiguity of the image to dissimulate the figure of the Tenth Muse of New Spain through the image of the Marian devotion. Or maybe dissimulation is not exactly the right term here, because it is through the Marian devotion of her conventual life that Juana Inés de Asbaje could have access to the rare material conditions that would allow her, in the society of early modern New Spain, to achieve her life of intellectual activity in spite of her gender. In her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, the intellectual autobiography written in 1691 in response to the criticism of her erudite activities as a nun by the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, she explains that she decided to enter the convent in order to avoid marriage and its mandatory tasks that would have compromised *la libertad de mi estudio* ‘the freedom to study’ (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 1951–57: IV, 446; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 1994).

Musa décima

In the portrait of Sor Juana Inés by Miranda, the medallion with the Annunciation stands at the interface between the image of the *Décima Musa María Santísima* impressed in her heart and the intellectual realm of the library of the nun poet *Musa Décima*. Operating the repetition and reduction *en abyme* of the larger composition, the mirror-shield brings to light the main principles of its structure: the Marian devotion that was constructing the space that allowed the seventeenth-century Mexican woman to place the book at the centre of her life. At the same time, the *escudo* was situating the Phoenix of America under the protection of the Virgin Poet and Mother of the Word. The painting was probably elaborated after an earlier portrait of the Sor Juana Inés made during her lifetime: sources attest that such works existed, even if none are conserved today. The Jesuit father Diego Calleja, in close contact with Sor Juana Inés from 1689, mentions one portrait of her in his verses in honor of her death. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz herself devoted at least two sonnets to her portraits, one lamenting the *engaño colorido* – the vain artifice and flattery of the image, the other playing with the concept of original versus copy (Maza 1952: 2–4). Considering the challenges that she had to face in order to defend her intellectual activity within

the context of her conventual life, these portraits made from life were probably less ostentatious and more prudent than Miranda's painting, and essentially focused on her physiognomy. They are most likely at the origin of the more sober half-length portrait-type that we know from Vargas' painting and other eighteenth-century derivations, depicting her with only two books – a book of hours half open in her left hand and a volume of her own works, *Obras de la Única Poetisa Soror Juana Ynés de la Cruz*, closed under her right hand.¹³ These portraits, as well as the *escudo de monja*, operated then a similar subtle balance between devotion and erudition. But the ambiguity of these images of the Annunciation with the reading Virgin and of the Virgin poet between her book of hours and the book of her own poetry, is also the expression of the negotiation that Sor Juana Inés had to undertake between her success as poet at the vice-royal court and her struggle as nun with the ecclesiastic authorities.

In his painting, Miranda reconstructs a visual dimension that Sor Juana Inés had self-fashioned during her lifetime and that had been accessible only to a restricted circle. The portrait evokes the nun poet in her study room, surrounded by her 'four thousand friends' that were, as she called them, her books, as well as by her musical and scientific instruments.¹⁴ In that frame, according to the relatively permissive rules of seclusion in the Jeronymite convent, she could receive her closest acquaintances and protectors, such as the vicereines Doña Leonora Carreto, marquise of Mancera, and Doña Maria Luisa Manrique de Lara, countess of Paredes, her confessor and spiritual father Antonio Nuñez, or her fellow poet Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. The portrait is certainly elaborated upon the codes of Spanish Hapsburg court portraiture, and recalls both the portraits of the Queen-regent Mariana de Austria, represented by Juan Carreño de Miranda in monastic vestments writing at a desk (ca 1675, Madrid, Real Academia de San Fernando), and the portraits of theologians and erudite ecclesiastics, such as the Archbishop-Viceroy Fray García Guerra depicted by Alonso López de Herrera standing nearby a desk with shelves filled with books of patristic theology in the background (1609, Tepetzotlán, Museo del Virreinato) (López Vizcaíno and Carreño 2007). Besides those figurative codifications, which frame Sor Juana Inés between manly erudition and feminine devotional life, the portrait by Miranda appears particularly well informed (Córdova 2014: 165–169). The twenty-three books on the shelves, with titles or authors carefully identified, gather volumes of theology and ecclesiastic history, literature, medicine and natural science, as well as the works of Athanasius Kircher and the writings of mythographers such as Pierio Valeriano and Natales Comes, all of which can be retraced in the references mentioned by Sor Juana Inés in her own texts.¹⁵ (Maza 1952: 18–21) The mathematical puzzle annotated on a sheet of paper which negligently sticks out of the upper shelf correspond to what the nun poet defined as her 'kirkerizo' (Maza 1952: 18). On the desk, the works of Sor Juana Inés are not generic books, but the complete edition of her writings in three volumes, the first published in Madrid in 1689, the second in Seville in 1692, and the third posthumously in Madrid in 1700. Moreover, as stated in the

long biographic inscription, the sonnet on *Esperance*, ‘Verde embeleso de la vida humana’, that she is shown to have just finished composing on the desk, is one of the unpublished poems that were not included in the three volumes edition of her works. Thus, the portrait stands as an official publication of the authentic image of Sor Juana Inés, elaborated upon the information given by the patron, Sor Maria Gertrudis de San Eustaquio, who had a direct knowledge not only of the sitter but also of the intellectual context and specific materials of her study room. However, what Miranda reconstructed in 1713, eighteen years after Sor Juana Inés’ death, was the image of a lost world.

In the early 1690s, with the weakening of the vice-royal power, which faced an uprising provoked by famine and the destruction of the vice-royal palace, Sor Juana Inés’ unique position became dangerously exposed. While the support of the vice-royal court that had promoted and protected her intellectual flourishing since her early years was vacillating, the power of the ecclesiastic authorities, who were attached to the reformation of the liberal monastic life of the creole elite convents, was increasing. Sor Juana Inés was then involved in a long and hard struggle with the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, and the archbishop of Mexico, Francisco de Aguiar y Seixas, who criticized her literary career as inappropriate for her religious life. In 1693, she had to renew her profession of faith that she dramatically signed with her blood: she renounced her secular writing, embraced a penitent life and, in 1694, emptied her study room, selling all her books, musical instruments and astronomical tools and giving the proceedings to charity. The following year, in April 1695, she died from plague.

The *escudo de monja* with the Annunciation, as a self-fashioned image of the Tenth Muse, was the only element of her poetic identity that Sor Juana Inés kept after she renounced her writing and her books. The importance that she attributed to that medallion is attested by the fact that we do not conserve it, at least in its integral form, because she was most likely buried with it. The archaeological excavations undertaken in the church of the Jeronymite convent in 1976–1981 uncovered the remains of 133 nuns in the lower choir, buried in a communal grave with their bride crowns, palms and candles. Beside those, only one body was found, buried in an isolated way. That body was also the only one showing no remains of the profession attributes, but instead presenting a rosary and a totally abraded copper medallion on the chest (Figure 3.12).¹⁶ (Jaén 1995; Montero Alarcón 2008: 139–147; Perry 2012). The unique nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was therefore presumably buried in a unique way, receiving the privilege to keep on her body for eternity the precious and particular image of herself that revealed the very essence of her poetic figure, which she had to leave aside at the end of her life.

Interestingly, in 1713, when Sor Maria Gertrudis commissioned Miranda to produce a ‘faithful copy’ of her spiritual mother, Sor Juana Inés, the image chosen did not celebrate the late repentant nun, spiritual example of conventual life, but instead commemorated the great intellectual figure, through a reconstruction of

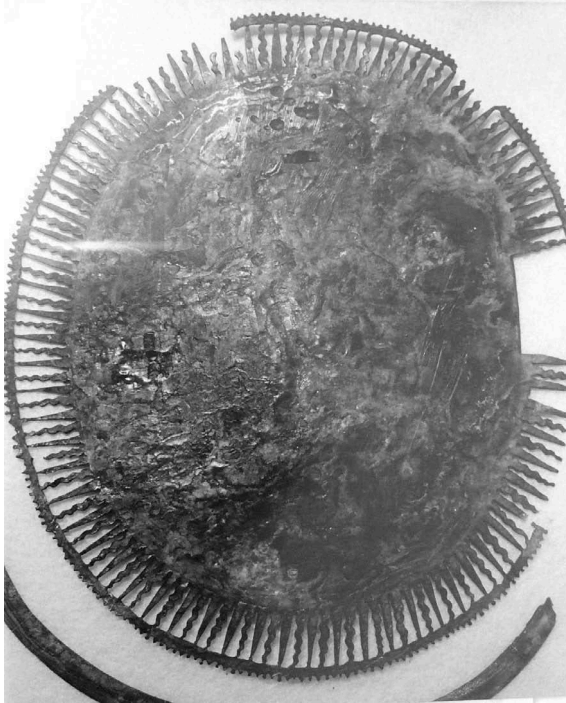


FIGURE 3.12 Presumed *escudo de monja* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, from the excavation of the lower choir of the church of the convent of Saint Jerome, Mexico City.

the lost world of her study room filled with books. In the large composition conceived by Miranda in conversation with his patron, the book of hours of the Virgin of the Annunciation placed on a small table covered with green velvet at the centre of the medallion resonates with the three volumes of Sor Juana Inés' works displayed on her desk, while the motif expands across the wall covered with the books that she patiently gathered to animate her poetic research. This figurative construction that, through the illustrious exemplum of the 'Phoenix of America', claims *libertad de estudio* for women in the conventual context, was elaborated in a period in which the ecclesiastic authorities were attempting to suppress the nuns' privileges of having private rooms, in order to impose the rigors of communal life on the wealthy convent of the Jeronymite (Perry 1999: 179–180, 2007; Córdova 2014: 122–147). The mirror-shield of Sor Juana Inés, reflection and projection of her female devotional and intellectual identity, as well as the constitutive attribute of her unique image, was therefore adopted by her Jeronymite sisters and adapted to the context of their own struggles. This process has been revived since Sor Juana Inés became a feminist icon: nowadays, in street art graffiti, the feminist symbol of the raised fist in the sign of Venus is embedded within her *escudo de monja*, revealing the dynamics of women's power at the heart of her figure (Figure 3.13).¹⁷



FIGURE 3.13 Anonymous, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, 2013, Graffiti, Puebla.

Notes

- 1 All translations are by the author unless otherwise specified.
- 2 My warmest thanks to Clara Bargellini for facilitating the visit for me and for generously sharing her observations and knowledge about the painting. This paper is elaborated from a talk first given in the conference *Visual culture and women's political identity in the early modern Iberian world*, at the Universidad Nova of Lisboa, CHAM, and later expanded in a lecture given in the departments of art history at Yale University, New Haven, and Johns Hopkins, Baltimore: I am grateful for the inspiring comments that I received in those occasions, particularly from Jean Andrews, Stephen J. Campbell, Pedro Cardim, Aaron M. Hyman, Jeremy Lawrance, Mitchell B. Merback, Barbara Mundy, Robert Nelson, Jeremy Roe, Nicola Suthor, Lisa Voigt. All my thanks also to Cleo Nisse for her careful revision of the text.
- 3 'Esta copia de la M[adre] Juana Inés de la Cruz dio Pa[ra] la Contaduría de este nuestro Convento la M[adr]e. María Gertrudiz de San Eustaquio, su hija, siendo Contadora. Año de 1713, *Miranda fecit*' read the lost inscription on Miranda's painting, transcribed by González Obregón (1979: 208). For the provenance, attribution, history of the painting acquired by the university in 1951, as well as for the hypothesis of the existence of two versions, see Maza (1952); Marcus Burke's entry on the painting in *Mexico, Splendors* (1990: 351–356); Rogelio Ruiz Gomar's entry on Cabrera's portrait in Pierce, Ruiz Gomar and Bargellini (2004: 206–210 n°35).
- 4 For the transcription of the full inscription, see Maza (1952: 286–289). On the seventeenth century conception of the portrait as a copy, the original of which refers to the living sitter, see the letter of Nicolas Poussin to Chantelou, in Preimesberger, Baader and Suthor (1999: 349–355).
- 5 'Rien ne l'éclaire mieux et n'établit plus sûrement toutes les proportions de l'ensemble' (Gide 1948: 41); translation in Dällenbach (1989: 7).
- 6 'Traigan en el manto, y escapulario una imagen de nuestra Señora cercada de los Rayos del Sol, y Corona de estrellas en la cabeza, con guarnicion llana, y decente,

- que no sea de Oro, piedras, ni esmalte'; Manso y Zúñiga (1635: 4v), cit. in Perry (1999: 75, n.25).
- 7 For the diffusion of the cult and iconography of Saint Clare of Montefalco in New Spain, see Iturbe Sáiz 2009. On the rhetoric of the image impressed on the heart promoted by the Jesuits, see Goettler (2007).
 - 8 For tattooing that survived to some extent in this period, particularly in the devotional context of pilgrimage, see Fleming (1997) and Guerzoni (2018).
 - 9 On this painting and the interpretation of the Transfiguration as manifestation of Incarnation, see Kasl (2017). For the recurrent motif of the pectoral medallion in New Spanish religious painting, see for example Gutiérrez Haces et al. (1997: 48, 87, 99, 112, 175).
 - 10 'l'intérieur de la pièce où se joue la scène peinte', (Gide 1948: 49); translation in Dällenbach (1989: 7).
 - 11 See for example the *Romancillo heptasílabo* 75, *Sabrás queried Fabio*, quoted as epigraph for this text (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 1951–57: I, 95). For the references to Athanasius Kircher in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's poetic of reverberation, see Finley (2019: 134–136).
 - 12 If no *escudo de monja* by Villalpando is conserved, the production of such objects could involve preeminent artists such as Miguel Cabrera, Miguel de Herrera or José de Páez for the eighteenth century (Armella de Aspe and Tovar de Teresa 1993; Perry 1999).
 - 13 See the versions by Fray Miguel de Herrera (1732, Banco Nacional de Mexico), or the anonymous copy in the convent of Saint Paula and Saint Jerome in Seville; *Mexico: Splendors* (1990: 351–356); Burke (1992: 119–125).
 - 14 According to her biographer Padre Diego Calleja (1700): 'su librería, donde se entraba a consolar con cuatro mil amigos, que tantos eran los libros de que la compuso'; see Maza (1980: 149).
 - 15 For Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as reader of Athanasius Kircher, see Findlen (2004).
 - 16 This *escudo*, which gained the status of relic of Sor Juana Inés, has nonetheless a radiant shaped outline that does not correspond to the frame of the medallion of the Annunciation depicted in the painted portraits.
 - 17 On Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the frame of feminist studies, see Merrim (1991), Kirk (1998), Bergmann (1990) and Powell (2017). On the revival of her iconography, see Atamoros Zeller (1995).

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