

The death of Sor Juana

*Luis Roberto Torres Escalona **

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was one of the most brilliant personalities of the Baroque period. Her work is characterized by an exceptional feminine and Mexican sensitivity, and is now considered the best example of Classical Spanish poetry in the Americas. Her life and work were part of a brilliant era filled with new literary, philosophical and scientific trends which brought great renown to New Spain (as Mexico was known during Colonial times) at the end of the 17th century.

Her activity in the field of culture —during a medieval epoch when science, wisdom and even talent were considered the exclusive domain of men— have made Sor Juana an exceptional figure in the modern history not only of Mexico but of the entire world, as a pioneer of women's rights.

Favors

At the age of sixteen Juana Ramírez de Asbaje, who came from Nepantla in the state of Mexico, became a protégée of Doña Leonor Carreto, the wife of Viceroy Don Antonio Sebastián de Toledo, Marquis of Mancera. Doña Leonor extended her protection to Juana Inés not because she was an orphan in the strict sense but out of admiration and sympathy for the young woman.

At the Manceras' court, Juana Inés gained an appreciation of the world and made her first social contacts. Just at the moment when her beauty, knowledge and grace had conquered friends and strangers alike, she decided to join the order of barefoot Carmelite nuns. Yet her stay in that order was not at all agreeable, given the severe discipline imposed on her.

Juana Inés' return to the world was brief. On February 24, 1669 she joined the Hieronymite nuns, whose less stringent discipline was better suited to the poet's delicate and erudite temperament.

During her first years of convent life, Juana Inés enjoyed privileges and "dispensations": she was allowed to read, write, converse with others and have servants. She was frequently visited by writing aficionados, both clergy and laymen, including the first Mexican journalist, Juan Ignacio de Castorena y Ursúa, and the learned Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora.

She was later to enjoy the support and appreciation of the new Viceroy, Don Tomás de la Cerda, Marquis of Laguna, and his wife the Countess of Paredes, who lived in Mexico from 1680 until 1688.

Intrigues

At the end of 1690, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz wrote her famous *Carta atenagórica* (Athenagoric Letter), in which she undertook a theological critique of a sermon by the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira. This work earned her enemies and troubles. The suggestion to write the letter apparently came from Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz,



Juan de Miranda, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, oil on canvas, 1695.

* Researcher at the Department of Artistic and Cultural Property, Office of University Assets, UNAM.

An extraordinary case

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a beautiful, sought-after woman who suddenly decided to become a nun. Then she was a nun who wrote love poems to ghosts, an intellectual interested in science and theology, who sometimes bordered on heresy.

She was a feminist *avant la lettre*, defending women's right to study. Her verse is of fundamental importance, providing us with a repertory of all metric forms. And at the end of her life came the most terrible thing: she sold her books, renounced all her previous work and devoted herself to the harshest ascetic practices.

Sor Juana was destroyed by the very powers she had served.

Octavio Paz.

Bishop of Puebla, who used it to discredit and infuriate a rival of his —Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas, Archbishop of Mexico, who was a fervent follower of Vieyra and notoriously hostile to women.

A torrent of replies and commentaries followed in short order, particularly given that Sor Juana had “little theological authority” to speak out on these issues, and above all because she was a woman. The polemics that thundered forth from church pulpits and the podia of seminaries and colleges reached such a pitch that for a time no other subject was deemed worthy of conversation. We now know that Sor Juana was used as a pawn in the personal quarrels between two powerful princes of the Church.

The envy, disapproval and hostility of her fellow nuns, together with Archbishop Aguiar y Seijas' opposition to her “worldly” activities, began to play havoc with Sor Juana's already tormented soul.

Loneliness began to wear her down. Don Tomás de la Serna, her protector, had died in Spain. Her friend the Countess of Paredes no longer wrote. A whole layer of sanctimonious and fanatical nuns began accusing her of mismanagement and blaming her sinful activities for the torrential rains, *chahuixtle* (corn blight) and other calamities that afflicted Mexico City in 1692.

Intolerance

In a world filled with uncertainty and fear, Sor Juana sought solace in an old father confessor and censor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda. It was he who had originally encouraged her to become a nun, while reproaching her from the beginning for her “profane” interests and “neglect of sacred matters.”

It is said that in late 1692 Sor Juana found herself censored, criticized and pressured by Núñez de Miranda. The idea was to cow her, bring her to heel and make her abandon her literary activity. It is clear that she was forced to abjure much of what she had said and written and to make a whole series of retractions. Núñez de Miranda went so far as to admonish her to declare herself worthy of “eternal death” and the “most infinite of hells.”

Plunder and death

During these ill-omened days Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz turned all her books, as well as her scientific and musical instruments, over to Aguiar y Seijas to be auctioned off. The proceeds were distributed to the poor. The archbishop was apparently in such a hurry to sell her belongings that he disposed of them at prices well below their real value. Not satisfied with selling off her library for a pittance, he seized her personal funds as well as those of the convent itself.

Simply because she was a woman, this distinguished poet was harassed by high Church officials. Not content with isolating her and tormenting her spiritually, they scattered her wonderful library and many of her instruments and belongings. The vendetta was so extreme that the ecclesiastical hierarchy sold off goods belonging to the convent she administered. These depredations sank Sor Juana into a deep depression, setting the stage for her early death.

Why did she enter the convent?

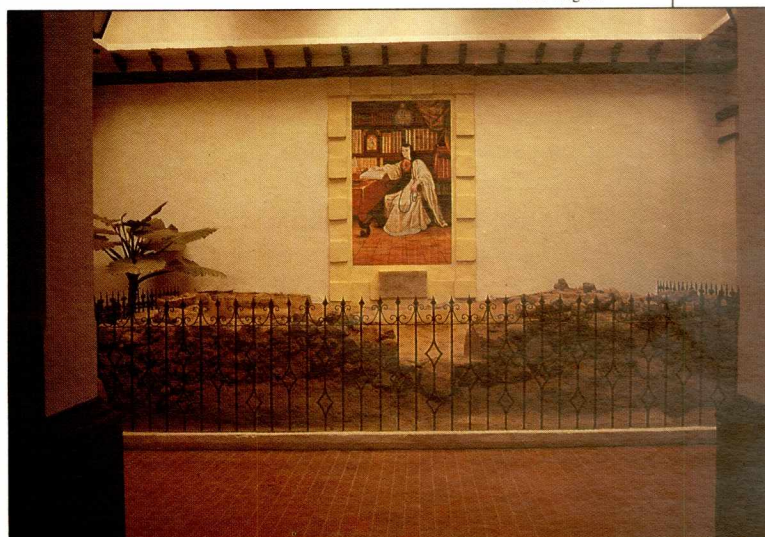
"I became a nun because, while I knew this state included things (of an accessory, not formal nature) which were quite repellent to my character, still, given my complete rejection of marriage, this was the least unbalanced and most decent thing I could choose in light of the security I wanted for my salvation; and to this (in the end the most important thing) I bent my head and all the little rebellions of my nature, such as wanting to live alone; not desiring any obligatory occupation which would stand in the way of my freedom to study, nor the sound of any community which would disturb the peaceful silence of my books."

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.
(Passage from her "Response to Sor Filotea de la Cruz")

Physical and moral ruin weakened Juana Inés' spirit. The suppression of intellectual freedom, isolation, abandonment by her friends and the intransigence of Church authorities set the stage for the poet's death.

Sor Juana died at the age of 46 on April 17, 1695, the victim of an epidemic that struck the convent of San Jerónimo. In the last period of her life she displayed a great piety and spirit of charity towards her fellow nuns in the face of the terrible scourge that decimated the convent.

A few months before her death, she wrote in the book of *Confessions*: "The day, month and year of my death should be noted here. By the love of God and His Most Pure Mother, I beg my beloved sister nuns, those of today and those of the future, to commend me to God, as I have been and am the worst that has existed. I ask the forgiveness of all, for the love of God and His Mother. I, the worst in the world: Juana Inés de la Cruz." ✕



Remains of the house where Sor Juana was born (Nepantla, 1651).

A tribute to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

To commemorate the third centenary of the death of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, which occurred on April 17, 1695, Mexico and the United States will host several activities on the life and work of the poet, considered the last great writer of the *Siglo de Oro* (the "Golden Century" of literary achievement in the Spanish language).

Sor Juana scholars will hold three international meetings in the U.S. and four in Mexico, on the writer's thought, criticism and the world of New Spain (as Mexico was known in Colonial times), providing the backdrop to her work.

A collection of essays, two revised editions and four other works will be published. An International Documentation Center will be opened, and film, video and theatrical showings will be organized. In May, the University of California's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies will sponsor the congress on "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Baroque Drama"; and the university named after the poet will host the "Sor Juana and Her World" congress in November.

Raquel Villanueva
Staff Writer.

Foolish men

Foolish men, you who accuse
woman without reason,
without seeing that you are the cause
of what you blame her for:

if with insistence unequalled
you solicit her disdain,
how can you want her to behave well
when you incite her to evil?

You combat her resistance
and then, so gravely,
say that fickleness
is the cause of her diligence.

With stubborn presumption you want
the one you are seeking to be
Thais in betrothal and
Lucretia in possession.

What humor can be more strange
than that which, senselessly,
steams up the mirror itself
and then complains it's cloudy?

With favor and disdain alike
you comport yourselves the same,
complaining if you're treated badly
and mocking if they love you well.

Thus no opinion can win the day;
since the most discreet, if she
admits you not, is ungrateful,
and if she does, is frivolous.

So foolishly you go about
with two measures, blaming
one for acting cruelly
and the other for being easy.

Yet how can the one whose love you seek
be of balanced temper
if the ungrateful one offends
and the easy one inspires anger?

Your pained lovers give
wings to their liberties
and after making them be bad
you want to find them virtuous.

Who is most to blame
in an errant passion:
the one who falls before your pleas
or he the fallen one who's pleading?

And who is most at fault
even if they do some wrong:
the one who sins to pay
or he who pays to sin?

So, why do you shrink away
from the blame that is yours?
Love them the way you make them
or make them what you seek.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz
(Excerpt from one of her most
famous poems)

Translation: Steven S. John.

