

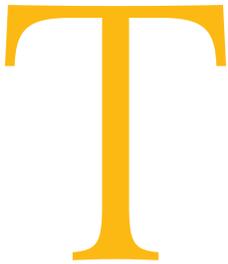
The Tenth Muse:

The Life of

Sor Juana Ines

de la Cruz

by ANN TWINAM



THIS IS THE *written version of a talk delivered November 3, 2011, by Prof. Ann Twinam of the Department of History at the University of Texas at Austin, as part of the ongoing presentations showcasing the “Treasures of the Benson.” That night the audience viewed the entry book of the Convent of San Jeromino in which Sor Juana had*

placed her signature in blood as “I the worst of all.” This is one of the rarest “treasures of the Benson,” seldom open to public viewing given its fragility. Also brought from the Rare Books section were some first editions published by this brilliant “Tenth Muse,” who overcame her gender and illegitimacy to become one of the most esteemed writers of colonial Mexico.

Historical Context

I will start, as I always start when talking to my students about Sor Juana, with my memory concerning the first time I heard her name. I was a sophomore, taking my first class in Latin American history. I didn't know that my professor Benjamin Keen was a major colonial scholar—students rarely know those kinds of things. What I do remember was that I loved his class. I will never forget what he said as he moved to the topic of Sor Juana. His face lit up as he

said, “And now I'm going to talk about Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz—a light shining from the darkness of colonial Mexico.”

I thought, “Wow, what does that mean?”

Thinking back, I wouldn't characterize colonial Mexico as dark, but I certainly understand what he meant about Sor Juana being a beacon. Sor Juana was born out of her time. Today she would be president of Harvard or head of the Council of Economic Advisers or a Nobel prizewinner in literature. Instead, her world forced her to use her talents to navigate as safe a place as possible to be able to exercise her passion and brilliance as a thinker and writer handicapped by the fact that she was a woman. I will consider three questions here:

1. What were the possibilities for a brilliant and beautiful girl in mid-seventeenth-century Mexico?
2. Why was the convent probably her only choice and what was her life like within it?
3. How did she become whipsawed by the ecclesiastical politics of her time, which led to one of her greatest works, “The Reply/La Respuesta.” In the end, was her spirit crushed? Was she defeated?

A Girl in Seventeenth-Century Mexico

What were the possibilities for this beautiful girl in seventeenth-century Mexico, given her background? Sor Juana started out with a number of variables against her. She was not rich, she was illegitimate, she was a woman. Her family was neither wealthy nor poor—her mother managed a farm near Puebla. Although in 1669 Juana

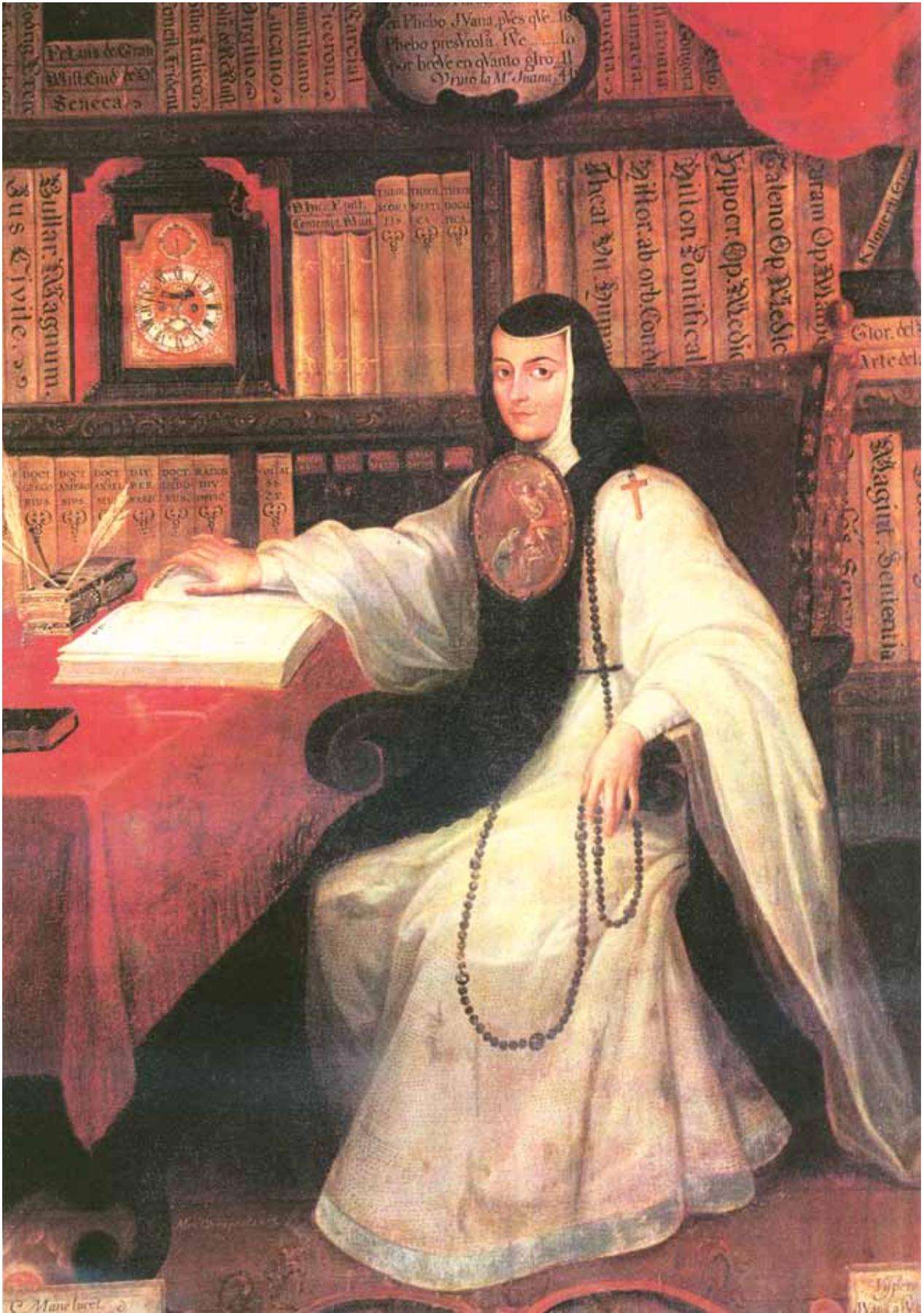


Image of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz by Miguel Cabrera, National Museum of History, Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City.



Title page of *Carta athenagorica de la madre Juana Ynes de la Cruz*, 1690. From the Genaro García Collection, courtesy of the Benson Latin American Collection.

described herself as the “legitimate daughter of Don Pedro de Asbaje y Vargas and of Isabel Ramirez,” this was not so. The death certificate of her mother—finally discovered in 1946—admits that Juana was a “daughter of the church.” This meant that she was illegitimate, which could have barred her from entrance to the convent. Although illegitimacy was not that uncommon for either the rich or poor in Mexico, it was a disadvantage worth concealment.

No doubt Juana’s heaviest burden was that she was not only a woman, but also brilliant. Her justification for the life of the intellectual, “The Reply/La Respuesta,” provides insights into her early years. At age three she learned to read, displaying her early genius. Around the age of six, her desire for learning became so intense that she begged her mother to let her dress up in men’s clothes and allow her to go and study in Mexico City at the university, which only men were allowed to attend. When she was nine (in 1660), she was sent to the capital to live with her maternal aunt and the latter’s husband, Juan de Mata. There, she remembers, after only a mere twenty lessons in Latin, she was able to read philosophical and theological works in the language. She began to be lionized in high society for her intelligence and also for her beauty. She attracted the attention of the viceroy and the court.

Here in every aspect of her story we encounter one of the key variables that shaped Sor Juana’s world—the critical presence or absence of patronage. In this instance, the outcome was favorable. When a

new viceroy, the Marquis de Mancera, arrived from Spain, Juana was invited to court in 1662 at the age of eleven. She soon became a favorite of Mancera and his wife, Leonor, and eventually became a lady-in-waiting. It was during these years that she astonished forty learned men who asked her questions on theology, science and history, which she answered with brilliance. Praised as a prodigy and a beauty, Juana began to write, although not yet to publish her works.

The Option of Convent Life

The problem was that Juana could not remain a lady-in-waiting at court forever. Women had few options in seventeenth-century Mexico. They could marry, live at home, or enter the convent. Juana faced additional problems given her illegitimacy and absence of a dowry. She was not inclined to marry; she wanted to continue to study, to read, and to write. The convent seemed a possible option. In 1667 Juana spent time at a Carmelite monastery but left after a few months, as it was too strict. Two years later, at the age of eighteen, she permanently entered the less austere monastery of the order of San Jeromino, where she took the name Juana Ines de la Cruz.

Did Sor Juana have a vocation? Probably not the way we think of it today. She certainly was religious, as were most women in colonial Mexico. However, she was likely no different from girls today who seek a career that will offer both economic security and social respectability, but her options were limited.

What was Sor Juana’s life like in the convent? To the modern eye, some colonial nunneries more resembled contemporary gated condominium communities, with the key proviso that the residents were not allowed to go outside the walls. Here the nuns owned two-story apartments—as did Sor Juana in Mexico City. These included spacious rooms, their own kitchen, a space to keep coal and firewood, and a basin of water for drinking and another for washing. Sor Juana also had a slave girl as a servant. Juana’s friends at court had raised the 3,000 pesos that would serve as her dowry and ongoing endowment to maintain her lifestyle. She then continued to manage her own funds, which she apparently did quite competently.

Nor was Sor Juana totally isolated in the convent; indeed, she remained in active communication with the outside world. Although she could not leave, outsiders could visit and converse with nuns through the *loctorio*, a gated window. Numerous visitors, including the viceroy, his wife, and the ladies of the court, visited Juana. Other distinguished persons such as theologians and priests also commonly visited nuns in convents. At times there were nonreligious entertainments with singing, dancing, and theatre, usually performed by the girls who were studying with the nuns.

We know that Sor Juana received many gifts from the elite of Mexico City and also from abroad. Her belongings included jewels, musical instruments, scholarly books, and mathematical instruments. She spent her days writing poems and plays and studying philosophy, music, and science. She also attended to her religious duties, observed convent rules, and held positions including that of accountant.

In 1673, Viceroy Mancera and his wife left for Spain, and for the next seven years the Archbishop of Mexico, Payo Enriquez de Rivera, would act as viceroy. Under his patronage Sor Juana continued her scholarship and writing. She began to receive ecclesiastic commissions, and she wrote songs to be sung at religious ceremonies and

plays. In early 1680 she was commissioned to design one of two arches that would be built to welcome the new viceroy arriving from Spain. She also wrote a pamphlet explaining the allegorical meaning of the arch she had designed, published as *Neptuno alegorica*. One of the remaining copies of this work is preserved in the Benson.

The new viceroy, the Marquis de la Laguna and his wife, Maria Luisa, the Countess of Paredes, became even stronger patrons of Sor Juana. During the eight years that the Lagunas remained in Mexico, Sor Juana would write the bulk of her work. This included courtly and religious poetry and her long poem, “El Sueño/The Dream,” an allegorical interpretation of the limits of human knowledge.

The Lagunas protected Juana, and now she needed such protection. Her confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda, had publicly criticized her for her writing and her studies, but with viceregal patronage, she was safe from interference. Her problems began in 1688 when the Lagunas returned to Spain, taking with them much of what Juana had written to date, to arrange for publication.

Ecclesiastical Politics and Later Life

How did Juana become whipsawed by the ecclesiastical politics of her time, which led to one of her greatest works, “The Reply/La Respuesta”? In the end, was her spirit crushed? Was she defeated?

These last five years of Sor Juana’s life have been the subject of much debate. It is important to understand the context of what happened. For years, Juana’s confessor Antonio Núñez de Miranda had chastised her for publishing at all, much less writing secular court and love poetry. Juana had never, however, ventured into the realm of theological commentary, the exclusive terrain of male ecclesiastics. However, she finally analyzed and critiqued a sermon published by Brazilian Jesuit Antonio de Vieyra more than forty years before in which he debated the key qualities of Christ. Sor Juana did not agree with his choices and suggested others.

What happened next occurred on two levels. On the surface, the Bishop of Puebla Fernández de Santa Cruz somehow obtained a copy of Sor Juana’s writings on Vieyra’s sermon, which he thought were brilliant. It is unclear whether he asked Sor Juana for permission to publish them.

What is suggestive is that also underlying Bishop of Puebla Fernández de Santa Cruz’s promotion of Sor Juana’s publication may have been an attack on a rival. The bishop had recently been in competition for promotion to the highest ecclesiastical position in Mexico, Archbishop of Mexico City. His competitor was the Bishop of Michoacán Francisco Aguiar y Seijas. Apparently Aguiar y Seijas was a great admirer of the Jesuits, who had supported his candidacy for the post. He was also a particular admirer of Antonio de Vieyra, the Jesuit whose sermon Sor Juana had criticized, and he had even published some of his works. Aguiar y Seijas was also known for his extreme aversion to females.

According to Octavio Paz, Puebla Bishop Santa Cruz was miffed. He had originally been the favored candidate for promotion to the archbishopric. However, in Madrid there was political manipulation, and his rival Aguiar y Seijas received the coveted post. Therefore the bishop of Puebla was secretly striking back at his new superior—he was publishing an essay by a woman that criticized Archbishop Seijas’s favored preacher. Even though Bishop Santa Cruz might plan to embarrass his rival, he did not directly challenge the archbishop, for he did not identify his own role in the process. Instead, he published

Sor Juana’s critique of Vieyra as the first part of a letter supposedly sent to Sor Juana from a Sor Filotea, a nun in a convent in Puebla. No such Filotea existed; rather, the bishop wrote the letter. While it praised the brilliance of Sor Juana’s arguments, it also severely critiqued that she wrote secular and theological works because she was a woman.

Bishop Santa Cruz’s plot to get back at a rival backfired. It unleashed a firestorm of criticism against the publication and its female author. Archbishop Aguiar y Seijas stormed against women in general, and against Sor Juana in particular. Bishop Santa Cruz, who had gotten Sor Juana in this mess, then turned on her and also reprimanded her. Sor Juana’s response was “La Respuesta/The Reply,” now considered the first work of feminist literature in the New World. In it, she provided a brief autobiography in which she brilliantly defended the life of the intellectual and the right of everyone, even women, to seek after knowledge. She also promised to follow a more “religious” routine.

The years of 1692 and 1693 were difficult ones for Mexico City, marked by flooding, disease, and food riots. They were also hard times for Sor Juana, for she lacked influential civil or church patrons. There was intense pressure for her to give away her possessions and to stop thinking and writing. In 1693 it appears that the church began an investigation of Sor Juana, and it was unclear if she might be a target of the Inquisition. The next year, 1694, Sor Juana celebrated a quarter century since taking her vows. That was when she signed in blood in the official book of the San Geronimo convent that she was the “worst of all.”

She abjured under great pressure; some say she was forced to sell her books and musical and scientific instruments. She donated some (but not all) of these to be sold to help the suffering poor in the city. The following year she died, during an epidemic that killed most of the nuns at her monastery.

At the end, was she broken?

Octavio Paz notes that the nuns of San Jeronimo estimated (and proved) that the archbishop’s agents had removed, in addition to the jewels, a sum equivalent to 5,200 pesos after her death. He suggests that those who said that she was defeated and had given up her library and collections, keeping only two or three devotional works and a few hair shirts, were wrong. This remains a debate among scholars.

Did she remain unvanquished? We can only speculate as we look at the page on the register of the convent of San Jeronimo, one of the real “Treasures of the Benson.”

I would like to conclude, however with, another note: I would like to emphasize that the real treasure of the Benson is the Benson itself.

I will once again appreciate it next semester when I bring my introductory colonial Latin American class here to see the famous Lienzo de Tlaxcala, an indigenous portrayal of the conquest. Students get so excited about coming that they sometimes bring their boyfriends and girlfriends; some even drag their parents. Also, next semester, I’ll be teaching a graduate research seminar. The first thing the syllabus says is “Get thee to the Benson.” This is the repository of amazing research materials that will make it possible for students to fulfill the goal of the course: to write a publishable research paper. Finally, I’m about to send a book to press. I cannot tell you the number of times when I’m looking for some rare book, that I go online to find where a copy might be, and it says—“Get to the Benson.”

Although treasures including Sor Juana’s signature are wonderful, in the end the Benson itself is the greatest treasure of all. ✨