

17th-century Mexican nun eloquently spoke out for women

Last year around this time there were several national and international events commemorating the 300th anniversary of the death, April 17, 1695, of Sor (Sister) Juana Inez de la Cruz, one of Mexico's best-known authors and feminists.

Her published works include more than 120 sonnets and ballads, many more short poems, three one-act dramas, two comedies, more than two dozen prologues to plays and numerous songs, carols and hymns.

Scholars often praise Sor Juana's 975-verse "First Dream" as a major contribution in Spanish-American literature to the Enlightenment, a movement that revived classical images with the emerging science and blended these with theology.

Her most popular work, however, is the poem that begins: "*Hombres necios que acusáis...*" — "You foolish and unreasonable men who accuse women (of your own weaknesses)..."

The poem is memorized by literature students across Latin America because it strikes at the heart of male attitudes toward women.

But Sor Juana's best defense of women's role is found in a more obscure work, a response to a bishop who had written a letter attempting to silence her.

This work is skillfully translated and edited by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell in "*The Answer/La Respuesta, Including a Selection of Poems (by) Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz*" (City University of New York Press).

Born in the mid-1600s to a rural family, Juana Ramirez y Asbaje educated herself in the library of her grandfather.

He must have ranked in the upper-middle class, if not higher, because the teen-age Juana was cared for by a family in the court of New Spain's viceroy.

She wrote her first poem at age 14 and a year or so later was engaged in a public examination by 40 of Mexico's most learned men.

But because she was a woman, the precocious young Juana could not pursue a university education. To satisfy her thirst for learning, she entered the convent where she wrote creatively for a quarter-century.

Protected by important political figures, including the viceroy and his wife, Sor Juana also engaged other writers and public figures in a variety of controversies. Once the viceroy was transferred back to Spain, however, Sor Juana's enemies struck.

Her principal adversary was the archbishop of Mexico, who had a dim view of women, especially nuns, expressing their opinions publicly.

To silence Sor Juana, he got her, through her confessor (spiritual adviser), to critique a sermon given some 40 years earlier by a famous preacher. Once Sor Juana put it in writing a purely theological treatise, the church quickly moved to silence her altogether.

The hatchet was disguised in a published letter to Sor Juana by another nun, “Sor Filotea,” who everyone knew was really the bishop of Puebla (Mexico’s second-most important city).

“ Sor Filotea” could not argue that Sor Juana shouldn’t write on religious topics since Teresa of Avila, a Spanish nun of the previous century, had written extensively on spirituality.

So the bishop disingenuously attacked Sor Juana’s worldly knowledge.

He allowed Sor Juana to articulate the rights of women. In “*La Respuesta*,” her answer to the bishop, she underscored women’s need to exercise intelligence by allowing creative intelligence to interpret women in biblical text.

Additionally, Sor Juana cleverly admonished St. Paul’s well-known admonition for women to keep silent in church. It is good advice, she said, since what Paul meant was that all who are not competent should keep silent.

Indeed, according to Sor Juana, several (male) authorities had decried that women, particularly nuns, had been deprived of the opportunity to study sacred letters, something that in fact deprived the whole church of their wisdom.

Though couched in the genre’s literary styles of the times, the message of women’s equality is clear.

Lamentably, Sor Juana’s enemies won. In the long run, however, those who silenced her have been relegated to minor footnotes in history.

By contrast, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz’s words proclaiming women’s intelligence and creativity have been repeated for centuries