

## THE TENTH MUSE— Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695)

Written by Mark Sconce

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Genius manifests itself in many ways, of course, but one aspect I find more compelling than others is duration, staying power, the ability to influence across the centuries of time. Take Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz, our featured poet this month, whose influence is palpable today nearly 320 years after her lamentable death.

I recently made a pilgrimage and had the privilege of seeing Sor Juana's influence at work in

real life and real time in Mexico City. There you will find the convent, now the **Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana**

, the cloister where Sor Juana spent her last 26 years. This university in the heart of the mega-city is dedicated to teaching the Humanities and only the Humanities. Our charming, intelligent docent, Cecilia Núñez, sensing my thought, asked “What student enrolled in Creative Writing for example would not be influenced by Sor Juana, our gifted, creative poet and writer whose name graces and spirit pervades our campus of nearly 1500 students?”

Sor Juana is ubiquitous. Paintings, sculptures, even her cell, confessional, and blue-tiled bathtub have been preserved. And if you’re a student majoring in *Gastronomía* (culinary arts), her thoughts on the subject are required reading.

“And what shall I tell you, lady, of the natural secrets I have discovered while cooking? I see that an egg holds together and fries in butter or in oil, but, on the contrary, in syrup shrivels into shreds; observe that to keep sugar in a liquid state one need only add a drop or two of water in which a quince or other bitter fruit has been soaked; observe that the yolk and the white of one egg are so dissimilar that each with sugar produces a result not obtainable with both together. I do not wish to weary you with such inconsequential matters, and make mention of them only to give you full notice of my nature, for I believe they will be occasion for laughter. But, lady, as women, what wisdom may be ours if not the philosophies of the kitchen? I often say, when observing these trivial details: had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more.” She then uses cooking instructions as a metaphor: “Love’s delicacy consists in being loved; one pinch too much or little spoils love’s taste.” The joy of cooking!

There is more. Sor Juana was Latin America’s first feminist whose sharp intellect easily cut through the theological mumbo-jumbo of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, which insisted that women were intellectually inferior and therefore should stick to their knitting. The most important issue for Sor Juana was the God-given, intellectual right of women to be allowed to read, study, write, publish, and even teach (a thoroughly male bastion at the time).

In a sly allegory she makes her point:

“There in Egypt, all the sages/by a woman were convinced

That gender is not of the essence/in matters of intelligence.

Victor! Victor!

A victory, a miracle; though more prodigious than the feat

Of conquering, was surely that the men themselves declared defeat.”

Sor Juana

Born out of wedlock just outside Mexico City, Juana first displayed precocious tendencies when she learned to read and write at the age of three. Juana’s *mamá* sent her to live with rich relatives in Mexico City some years later where her talents in literature and music plus her preadolescent beauty caught the attention of the Spanish Viceregal court. The Vicereine invited Juana to reside in the palace as her maid-in-waiting. Juana proceeded to dazzle the court and professors near and far with her knowledge (gleaned from voracious reading), her skills in argument, and her beautiful appearance and manner.

What they didn’t know was that Juana was, well, Sapphic, as we poets like to say. Her would-be lover would be none other than the Vicereine herself. And when her longings became apparent (“It matters not that you can escape my arms and breast,” she wrote, “if I can imprison you in my fantasy.”), the Vicereine backed off, not for lack of love no doubt but because the Viceroy, her husband, just might disapprove.

Seventeenth century Mexico, just imagine! In New Spain the effects of the Inquisition were still being felt. Strange and malicious ideas about women were being fostered, and especially by the Church. As the Archbishop remonstrates in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s novel *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*, “You allowed the room to be defiled by a woman’s presence. You know that causes irreparable damage to my liver. Besides, women have no souls.”

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There were only three things a lady could do: become a wife, become a courtesan, or become a nun. Since Juana held a dim view of marriage (“To catch a husband is an art; to hold him is a job.”)<sup>2</sup>, she did something characteristically courageous: she entered convent life in Mexico City in the year of our Lord 1669, and there she remained a nun for the rest of her life. Intellectual effort needed solitude and time to think and write.

“...given my completely negative feelings about marriage, it was the least disproportionate and most fitting thing I could do.”

Her convent cell (first and second floors) was large enough to hold a telescope, thousands of books, scientific and musical instruments, and here she lucubrated night after night studying,<sup>3</sup> memorizing, writing—poetry, plays, romances, dramas, letters, songs. Listen to the Baroque rhythms:

Which has the greater sin when burned/By the same lawless fever:

She who is amorously deceived/Or he, the sly deceiver?

Or which deserves the sterner blame/Though each will be a sinner:

She who becomes a whore for pay/Or he who pays to win her?

Misguided men, who will chastise

a woman when no blame is due,

oblivious that it is you

who prompted what you criticize.

Trs by Margaret Sayers Peden

Costliness and wealth bring me no pleasure;

the only happiness I care to find

derives from setting treasure in my mind,

and not from mind that's set on winning treasure.

I prize no comeliness. All fair things pay

to time, the victor, their appointed fee

and treasure cheats even the practiced eye.

Mine is the better and truer way:

to leave the vanities of life aside,

not throw my life away on vanity.

Tr by Alan S. Trueblood

Sor Juana was wildly popular in New Spain and even Spain itself. But ecclesiastical critics, her superiors, were not beguiled. Sheer envy and resentment played a role. They launched a campaign to break her spirit and they did. Result: “Self-flagellation, penance, and mortification of the flesh,” wrote one biographer. “Now I sit here with comfrey compresses on the welts and pray they don’t become infected.” Finally, they forced her to renew her vows but this time signed with her own blood. Novelist Alicia Gaspar, after extensive research, imagines Sor Juana’s reaction to the Archbishop’s next order removing every one of her writing tools:

“How dare you remove my voice? Why don’t you cut into my throat and pull out my vocal chords, yank out my tongue, pluck out my eyes, fill my nose and ears with tallow, slice off the tips of my fingers? Each one of my faculties is tied to my quill. (‘...black teardrops from my melancholy pen.’) Without it I am blind and deaf and mute and insensate. My thoughts twist around like worms in my head. My mind rots in this silence, my spirit becomes ash. I’m completely empty. I’m completely alone without my voice.”

Then, with logic and passion, she drives home the point: “Your Reverence wishes that I be coerced into salvation while ignorant, but beloved Father, may I not be saved if I am learned? Is not God, who is supreme goodness, also supreme wisdom? Then why would He find ignorance more acceptable than knowledge?”

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The virulence of the plague of 1695 that claimed Sor Juana’s life matched in a lamentable way the virulence of seventeenth century misogyny.

Long, long before Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, long before the clarion calls of Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gloria Steinem, there was

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, an anachronism, a proud elitist, a dedicated learner, a subtle subversive, and my favorite feminist waiting for them to catch up.

So the next time you fish a 200 pesos note from your pocket, look closely at her image and reflect...

1 The nickname given Sor Juana by her contemporaries; nine Muses just weren't enough.

2 Simone de Beauvoir

3 There was scarcely a science she didn't study. She believed that knowledge of the sciences could only strengthen religious faith. Please pay attention, Tea Baggers!