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Creating Content from the Convent: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

The Spanish Golden Age of theatre was a period of time during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in which accomplishments and works were created by several artists across both Spain and New Spain, which is present-day Mexico. One of the features of the Golden Age in Spain that set it apart from other European nations at the time was the roles that women served in the theatre, both on and off the stage. Along with the employment of female performers on stage, there were also several female playwrights whose works challenged the norms that had been prevalent in the theatres of this time. While there is not much known about the lives of most of the female playwrights of the Spanish Golden Age, there is a substantial amount of evidence that supports Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's prominence in Spanish drama and literature.

From a very young age, Sor Juana, originally known as Juana Ramírez de Asbaje, always had a yearning for education and learning. She was born an illegitimate daughter to a Spanish father and Creole mother around the year 1651. As a child, Juana was eager to step outside of the beliefs and ideals of what a woman in society "should" be. In fact, Juana would often follow her sister to school when she was young. The instructor at the school permitted Juana to remain her attendance with her sister, which aided her in developing her ability to read. Once she could read and write, Juana spent a great deal of her time in the library that belonged to her grandfather, who was most likely a man of great knowledge. Even in her primitive years as a scholar, Juana faced hurdles in her pursuit of knowledge. She wanted to attend schools and universities away from home, but her mother would never grant her permission. Thus, Juana took to her

grandfather's library, where she began her quest for knowledge that would eventually take her to places unbeknownst to her.

Following her grandfather's death, Juana moved to live in Mexico City with her aunt. In a new city, Juana continued to yearn for more educational opportunities. She even offered to disguise herself as a man in order to attend the university, but once again, her family forbade her to do so. Not much time had passed before Juana was introduced to the court of the Viceroy Marquis de Mancera. Impressed with her wealth of knowledge, she was appointed as the lady-in-waiting to Doña Leonor Carreto, who was the Marquesa de Mancera. Juana spent the vast majority of her teenage years in service. During this time, the viceroy gathered a panel of about 40 notable scholars from the area to test Juana's intelligence. It was most likely during these tests of knowledge that Juana's skills and intelligence were first popularized throughout Mexico. It was not just Juana's intelligence that gained her a high reputation throughout the public; Juana was also known as a very beautiful woman. However, Juana showed no intention of pursuing a marital life. In 1669, she entered a convent at the young age of 21 years old where she would remain for the rest of her life.

As it was the only place where a woman could live isolated from distraction from the outside world, the convent was the hub for study, creation, and accomplishment for Sor Juana. In the space that was provided to her, she kept books, scientific instruments, and maps. As she was known for the poems, prose, and plays that she wrote, her studies also included music, philosophy, and natural science. She also had her own library, and she would often speak with scholars from the area. All of her most famous works were written during the time she spent in the convent. Similar to her connection with Marquis de Mancera and Doña Leonor Carreto, Sor Juana also had a close relationship with another noblewoman of the time, Maria Luisa Manrique

de Lara y Gonzaga. Maria Luisa would often visit the convent during the time that she spent in Mexico. In her return to Spain, Maria Luisa took Sor Juana's poems across the ocean and arranged for the publication of Sor Juana's first book, which was followed by three more editions. However, despite her intelligence and service in the convent, as a woman of great knowledge during this time, Sor Juana was still subject to criticism and disapproval.

In 1688, the departure of Marques and Maria Luisa de la Laguna from Mexico meant that Sor Juana would lose the safety that she received from the relationship she had with them. Soon after their departure, Sor Juana faced adversity after a letter of hers was published without her consent. Included in this letter was not only her critique of a well-known Jesuit sermon, but the letter also ridiculed Sor Juana for both the comments she made on the sermon, as well as the content and nature of the poems she wrote. In response, Sor Juana wrote *La Repuesta a Sor Filotea,* which translates to "*Answer to Sister Filotea*". Many consider her published response as the first feminist manifesto, as she defends the rights of women to receive an education, among many other things. This writing would not be held in high regard at the time as she further received criticism, which ultimately resulted in religious authorities demanding her submission of any non-religious texts that she had in her possession. She continued to publish her writings, most of which were *villancicos*, which were poems that are typically sung for Catholic feasts. However, these writings were not religious in nature, and instead could be categorized as pieces of feminist literature. Sor Juana continued to face criticism for her writing, and eventually put down the pen for good. Her library and most of her scholarly collections were sold. Sor Juana remained in the convent for the rest of her life until 1695, when a plague hit the convent. Sor Juana cared for her sisters until she succumbed to the disease around the age of 44.

While it is important to understand the history that led to the beginning of Sor Juana's practice as a writer, it is also important to understand the content and nature of her works. One of the ways that Sor Juana defied the norms of the time was by establishing strong female characters in her dramas. As this was still the 17th century, the theatre was still typically a male-dominated field, but the introduction of female performers and playwrights led to a shift in the types of stories that were told and the types of people who told them. In addition to female characters, Sor Juana incorporated allegorical characters in her plays, as they portrayed people from different places. Two of these characters, for example, were named Aztec and America, and they represented the people from those different nations.

Another major element of Sor Juana's writings was the incorporation of the Aztec culture in her plays. Not only would she include characters who were a part of the culture, but she would include detailed descriptions of the costumes the characters should wear. These pieces of information were included in the plays because she was conscious of the fact that the actors in Spain would not have any experience or knowledge of the Aztec culture, and she also wanted an accurate depiction of these people. Ultimately, Sor Juana wanted to include the Aztec culture in her works as an attempt to bridge to gap between the Spanish audiences and the culture of the indigenous people of Mexico.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's impact on the Spanish Golden Age can be traced through her endurance of the challenges she faced as a woman, both in her earlier years and in the latter part of her life. While being the reason she encountered much of the adversity she faced, her persistent motivation to expand her knowledge was the driving force that led her to make the impact she had on Spanish drama and literature.

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