

The Intellectual Nun of Early Mexico

As in our discussion of Benjamin Banneker, given the dearth of mathematical research in early Mexico, we may stray from the path of people who were strictly mathematicians and consider people who were simply mathematically competent. One such person was the remarkable Sor (Sister) Juana Inés de la Cruz, who was a first-rate poet and playwright. Born Juana de Asbaje y Ramirez on November 12, 1651 at San Miguel Nepantla, she was literate by age 3 and writing poetry by 8. Merely getting taught was a problem in the social context of the times. A young girl could hardly find well-educated older women to teach her anything really erudite, and close contact with any male tutor except a priest or monk would have been considered inappropriate. In the end her family allowed her to be tutored in Mexico City by a priest named Martn de Olivar. She became a nun at age 16, where her mathematical abilities procured for her the position of accountant. She had been allowed contact with intellectuals from an early age, however, and apparently did not consider that her vow of obedience required her to keep her opinions to herself. She once engaged in a theological debate and, at the request of the Bishop of Puebla, sent him her positions in writing. The Bishop then perfidiously released what she had written to the public, along with a disapproving preface he had written himself under the pseudonym of “Sor Filotea.” If he thought she would take this betrayal lying down, he was mistaken. She wrote a detailed response, saying that it would be much better if she had had available to her an older woman who was “as learned as Laeta and knew how to teach in the way Saint Paul and my Father Saint Jerome direct!” (Wright, 1933, pp. 338–371) ¹ Unfortunately, she said, only male tutors were available, so that even fathers who would otherwise be willing to have their daughters educated preferred “leaving [them] in a barbaric, uncultivated state” rather than “exposing them to an evident danger such a familiarity with men breeds.”

Sor Juana wrote many plays and poems on both sacred and secular themes, including love poems—a remarkable subject, one would have thought, for a nun. She died of an epidemic while caring for other stricken nuns, on April 17, 1695. The life and works of Sor Juana have been very well studied; a good introduction to this study can be found at the following website.

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~sorjuana/>

Literature

Wright, F. A., 1933. *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York.

¹ The reference to Saint Paul apparently means his *Letter to Titus* 2:3–4, where he writes, “The aged women likewise, . . . That they may teach the young women. . . .” However, the instruction described was aimed at producing docile wives and homemakers, not intellectuals. Saint Jerome (ca. 342–420) was the translator who produced the Latin Vulgate Bible. He disapproved of marriage and regarded his own intellectual interests as temptations. He acquired a considerable following among upper-class women converts and wrote letters to friends on the education of their daughters. One of these friends was the Laeta mentioned by Sor Juana. Laeta was the daughter-in-law of Paula, one of Jerome’s disciples. She wished to know how to raise her daughter, also named Paula, for a life of celibate devotion. In 403 CE Jerome gave this advice in Letter 107 of his collected works. In contrast to Paul, the education Jerome had in mind was for religious vocations.