

Here, she was able to continue her studies in the safety of her own parlor, and she began to produce her own works, where she wrote about religion, and women's education. Nuns were given their own what were called *cells*, and Sor Juana transformed her space into a parlor, where she would have the Viceroy's wife, and other elite women to study reading and writing.<sup>8</sup> Sor Juana mentioned in her letter to Sor Filothea, that the Mother Superior of the convent instructed Sor Juana to quit reading to focus on her spirituality with God, however, Sor Juana could not because she could not prevent herself from learning.<sup>9</sup> Sor Juana advocated for women's education under the Catholic Church because she wished for women to strengthen their relationship with God. However, other historians believe, which I will analyze in further sections, that Sor Juana can be considered a proto-feminist, which is a feminist during a time where the concept of feminism was unknown. And I believe that Sor Juana was, in fact, a proto-feminist. In my opinion, Sor Juana did not realize that she was advocating for more than what she said she was. Education goes further than the knowledge of God, and she wanted women to be able to learn how to read, and write so they too could publish their own writings. She also argued that by putting women in positions of authority, women could educate other women.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, in 1694, a year before she died, she was forced to sell her books, and focus on charity work for the poor. Sor Juana died of smallpox while at aid with her fellow sisters who were infected by the disease.<sup>11</sup>

### **Life During the Seventeenth Century under the Catholic Church**

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was an elite white woman, therefore, she was able to accomplish more than a woman of lower class than her. For historical context, I want to

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<sup>8</sup> Henderson, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1648-95", 131.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1648-95", 135.

<sup>10</sup> Henderson, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1648-95", 140.

<sup>11</sup> Henderson, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 1648-95", 143.

emphasize, and explain the significance of creoles, and of course the Catholic Church, during the seventeenth century. The goal of the Catholic Church was to establish a unified society under the Church, however, there was already a racial hierarchy in place. Creoles, Spanish descendants, were considered to be the elites of society because they were white, and with this, they were given special privileges. Therefore, anyone who was not white, received harsher treatments, and were considered to be inferior.<sup>12</sup> In certain areas of the Americas, creoles lost their privileges due to the suppressing Indian communities, however, they turned to the Catholic Church to regain their dominance in society.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, the creoles built universities, cathedral chapters, and nunneries, which strengthened the Churches.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it was the creoles who placed themselves on top of the social hierarchy, and completely disregarded the native, and indigenous communities. The main expectation the Church held against women was virtue as women were needed to remain pure—this was one of the many ideologies Sor Juana debunked in her writings, especially her poem *On Men's Hypocrisy*. Women's virtue was inflicted on women by the Church, and the Catholic Church held different expectations for each class of women. A woman's sexuality was how the Church controlled them, and control was considered to be as dangerous to the social order.<sup>15</sup> Elite white women posed a threat to the hierarchy if she were to be sexually active outside of marriage.<sup>16</sup>

Sor Juana was an elite in the convent, therefore, she did not experience the hardships women of lower class did. However, this did not mean that the Church viewed her differently. She was a creole, but she was also a woman, therefore her life was difficult in a different way

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<sup>12</sup> Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity in Colonial Spanish America." in *American Literary History*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 424.

<sup>13</sup> Cañizares-Esguerra, "Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity in Colonial Spanish America." 424.

<sup>14</sup> Cañizares-Esguerra, "Racial, Religious, and Civic Creole Identity in Colonial Spanish America." 424.

<sup>15</sup> Martha Few, "Women, Religion, and Power: Gender and Resistance in Daily Life in Late-Seventeenth-Century Santiago de Guatemala", in *Ethnohistory*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 631.

<sup>16</sup> Few, "Women, Religion, and Power: Gender and Resistance in Daily Life in Late-Seventeenth-Century Santiago de Guatemala", 631.

compared to other women. The reason why I am comparing and contrasting Sor Juana's life to other women is because of the Church's views on women—which was entirely what Sor Juana wanted to change, or encourage the Church to change so to speak. Martha Few, a historian who studied and analyzed different lives of colonial women during the seventeenth century, compared the life of two different class women Doña Lorenza de Galvés, and Sebastiana de la Cruz. In 1668, an unknown mulatta slave accused Doña Lorenza, an elite widowed white woman, of witchcraft to the Holy Inquisition of the Catholic Church. According to Few, Doña Lorenza was seen with other women; two mulatta slaves, a black slave, and two Indians, while they performed a ritual.<sup>17</sup> In 1694, Sebastiana de la Cruz was accused, by the Holy Inquisition, of admiration of her son, “worshiping her son as the son of God”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, her son supposedly had divine powers. These two cases had different outcomes based on the social status the women had—different class meant different expectations. The Church was concerned with Doña Lorenza's sexuality because of her elite status, however, the Church was not concerned at all regarding Sebastiana's because she was of the lower class. The lack of concern about Sebastiana's sexuality could suggest “that race and class also played a role in expectations of women's “virtue”, and the state's notion of order”.<sup>19</sup> It did not matter where on the social ladder a woman stood, she was expected to be submissive to the Church. This was what Sor Juana wanted to change.

To provide more context on the relationship between women and the Catholic Church, I also want to emphasize the power dynamic between men and women during this time. Asunción Lavrin, another twentieth century historian, wrote that women were viewed as weaker than men,

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<sup>17</sup> Few, “Women, Religion, and Power: Gender and Resistance in Daily Life in Late-Seventeenth-Century Santiago de Guatemala”, 632.

<sup>18</sup> Few, “Women, Religion, and Power: Gender and Resistance in Daily Life in Late-Seventeenth-Century Santiago de Guatemala”, 633-634.

<sup>19</sup> Few, “Women, Religion, and Power: Gender and Resistance in Daily Life in Late-Seventeenth-Century Santiago de Guatemala”, 631.

therefore, they needed a male companion for protection, and stability.<sup>20</sup> Prior to marriage, women were instructed to remain pure, while men were not expected to hold any moral values, which led to Sor Juana's argument of the double standard within society. The goal of the Spanish Catholic Church was to establish a unified society under the Church, and the only way to accomplish this was through marriage. According to Lavrin, marriage ensured the settlement and stability, because of the aftermath of the Spanish conquest in the Americas.<sup>21</sup> In the eyes of the Church, marriage was a holy sacrament, which was an essential to Christian living. In other words, women were instructed to either marry, or join a convent. Either way, it was crucial for women to be spiritually connected to the Church. Under the Church, women were considered to be weaker than men because they lacked resistance to temptation, and were more emotional compared to men. Women were also physically impaired, and fragile, therefore they needed a male companion for protection, and stability. This protection was mainly for women's virginity and purity, because a woman needed to stay pure in order to be accepted under the Church. Sor Juana exposed this double standard in her poem *On Men's Hypocrisy*, which became one of the most famous works of Sor Juana.

Although women were viewed as inferior to men, women could obtain some amount of power in this society. I mention this because I want to highlight how life was for women, and why Sor Juana wanted the Church to re-evaluate its perspective of women. This power that women would ultimately gain came after her husband's death. However, prior to marriage women were able to own property, and after marriage, if her husband were to approve, she could then engage in activities involving said property. Her children could also inherit that land as well. After a husband's death, this land would be divided between the wife, and the children. All of

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<sup>20</sup>Asunción Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society", in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 324.

<sup>21</sup> Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society", 324.

this, of course, was beneficial to the elites of society. Women of the lower classes were obligated to work outside of the home, because their husbands could not make enough money to support their families.<sup>22</sup> This work included pottery making, or weaving. In the more urban areas, women worked in the textile industry with wax or tobacco. During King Charles III of Spain's reign, he issued for women to incorporate into these factories, however, the Wars of Independence altered women's involvement. Some women were able to elevate their social status, however, there were many who could not. Elite women did not have this obligation, since they were usually well off financially, and motherhood did absorb the majority of their time and energy.<sup>23</sup> Women were able to control the property they owned prior to marriage, however, this was the only way for women to hold some sort of power. It was also not rare for women to be financially stable after her husband's death, because of his dowries being inherited to the widow. Sor Juana was born illegitimately, and this was not uncommon during this time period. The illegitimacy rate of Mexican cities was forty percent, and this was because there was a shortage of suitable companions for the elite women. As a result, women began sexual relations with any man who was available in hope for marriage. This is important to note because marriage that was promised to a woman, as well as sexual relations, forced the male to be responsible for his wife's honor before the law, and the Church.<sup>24</sup> The complexities of marriage under the Catholic Church, were the exact reasons as to why Sor Juana took the veil in the first place. She had no desire to marry, because she would not be able to continue her studies as she did under the convent, even though she was elite.

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<sup>22</sup> Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society", 329.

<sup>23</sup> Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society", 330.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Bakewell, "Women, Secular and Religious." in *A History of Latin America*, (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 264.

Although, under some circumstances, women did have some power, however, men used the power of the Church to keep women inferior. This male dominance, which was created by the Church, stripped any type of authority from women, because they were considered to be unstable, and morally fragile.<sup>25</sup> Spanish women of the elite status, however, were able to hold authority over non-Spanish women, and elite Spanish men were able to do the same with men who were not Spanish—this all ties back to the racial hierarchy placed by the creoles. However, this did not mean that women had any power in political senses, but they did share the same amount of honor as men did. There still was a double standard in place, and that double standard was exactly what Sor Juana wanted the Church to dissolve. And honor was very important in colonial life during the seventeenth century in Latin America.<sup>26</sup> Honor was highly important during the seventeenth century for both men and women. However, this honor was shown in different ways between the sexes. For men, sexual relationships became the main way to attain honor, because biological men could not become pregnant, they were able to remain sexually active.<sup>27</sup> For women, if she were to be sexually active and not married, she would be shunned from society and the Church. Sor Juana mentioned this hypocrisy in her poem *The Hypocrisy of Men*, which was a direct exposure of the Catholic Church's ideologies on women's sexuality. If a woman were to damage her purity in any way, her honor under the Church would have been destroyed. However, it was the exact opposite for men. Sor Juana advocated for women's education under the Catholic Church because she wished for women to strengthen their relationship with God. However, other historians and I believe that Sor Juana can be considered a proto-feminist, which is a feminist during a time where the concept of feminism was unknown.

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<sup>25</sup> Lavrin, "Women in Spanish American Colonial Society", 331.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Cameron Bristol, "Patriarchs, Petitions, and Prayers: Intersections of Gender and Calidad in Colonial Mexico," in *Women, Religion & the Atlantic World, 1600-1800*, edited by Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, (Toronto: Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 180–202. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttv8q.12>.

<sup>27</sup> Ann Twinam, "Fathers: Life Course and Sexuality," in *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007), 91.

And I believe that Sor Juana was, in fact, a proto-feminist, which correlates back to the idea that she indirectly challenged the Church.

### **The Purpose and Influence of Convents in Society**

Sor Juana indirectly challenged the Catholic Church by publishing works that contradicted what the Church enforced on women, however, she was able to do so because of the privileges she gained while living in a convent. In order to understand the significance of Sor Juana, I want to also emphasize how important convents were for colonial society. Life during seventeenth century Latin America was controlled by the social hierarchy inflicted by the Catholic Church. This hierarchy gave women different expectations based on the color of their skin, especially their sexuality. Sexuality, specifically purity culture, was how the Church controlled women, and that is shown through the convents.

Women were given two choices in life, and they were to either marry, which was always arranged by her family, or to take the veil. And to no surprise, women most often became a nun in order to avoid the responsibilities married women had. In Sor Juana's convent, each nun had their own parlor, and room, also known as *cells*, for privacy, because nuns needed to pray every night, and connect to God one on one. This was a very important aspect of conventional life. However, in the convent of La Purísima Concepción, located in Mexico, the nuns were forced to live communally, with no privacy whatsoever. If disease were to spread, which was very common at the time, the nuns infected had to quarantine themselves. Therefore, a nun would fake this sickness in order to be alone so she could continue with her spiritual activities that required privacy. A disease spread, known as "the mal", where the infected are under a trancelike state; the body would involuntarily jerk. The nuns began to manipulate its symptoms to avoid