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BOOK ADDS NEW DIMENSION TO LATER LIFE OF SOR JUANA

To be a free-thinking, scholarly, independent woman in patriarchal 17th Century Mexico, one had to have some secrets.

Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, sometimes called the first feminist of the Americas, had her share.

And Sara Poot-Herrera, a professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Santa Barbara,

reveals some of them in her book, Los guardaditos de Sor Juana, ("The Little Secrets of Sor Juana") just published in Spanish by La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Poot-Herrera's book is based on recently discovered documents related to Sor Juana's life.

Those documents are forcing scholars to reexamine and in some cases reform many assumptions about her life.

Born illegitimately in 1651, Sor Juana soon proved herself a prodigy, learning to read by the age of three.

At nine, she went to live with her grandfather in Mexico City, where her hunger for education feasted in his extensive library.

By 15, she was recognized as one of the most learned women in Mexico.

At 20, she entered the Convent of San Jeronimo, where her quarters became the center of an intellectual circle that included the viceroy of New Spain,

the Marquis de la Laguna; and his wife, the Countess de Paredes.

She studied the latest advances in science. She advanced the idea that women should play a greater role in Mexican society. And she wrote -- plays, poems, songs and essays -- much of which her close friend the Countess sent to Spain to be published.

But Sor Juana's endeavors were not looked on with favor in all quarters.

And when her protectors, the Marquis and Countess, were reassigned to Spain, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Mexico pressured her to give up her scholarly pursuits and spend her time tending to her duties as a nun.

After lashing out against her detractors with her most famous essay, "Respuesta," in which she defended the right of women to seek an education and cited more than 40 women who had made contributions to the world, Sor Juana was forced to give up her library and -- so many thought -- her devotion to her writing and independent thought.

But several documents found in recent years reveal, Poot-Herrera says, that Sor Juana did not give up her writing at all.

"We now know that Sor Juana continued to write up until her last moment," Poot-Herrera said.

Recent documents have also proved that in one of her battles with church authority, Sor Juana was not rejected by her confessor for her religious views as was widely reported as historical fact.

Indeed, it was she who dismissed him when he joined with others in trying to suppress her.

Poot-Herrera, who specializes in Mexican and Spanish-American literature, has written more than 50 articles and edited two books on the life and literature of Sor Juana.

In 1997, the Mexican-American Opportunity Foundation named her woman of the year for her work on Sor Juana.

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