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Following Saint Teresa: Early Modern Women and Religious Authority



Stacey Schlau

Prologue¹

A few years ago, while on vacation in Mexico with my family, we paid a social call on the Sisters of the Discalced Carmelite convent in Puebla. While every nun in the convent (about thirteen or fourteen) came to sit with us (on their side of the *reja*, of course), the Abbess directed the conversation. When I said I had come to share news of their Sisters in Spain,² and to bring news back, the Mother Superior told the story of the convent's first great miracle. During the early seventeenth century, when the convent was founded, the new nuns did not know exactly the colors, materials, or shape of the Discalced Carmelite habit. Fortunately, the Mother Superior twice had a vision of Saint Teresa of Avila, who told her not to worry and promised help. Eventually, despite natural disasters, a convent in Spain (possibly Caravaca) managed to send to Puebla, with an accompanying letter, one of their habits for the Mexican nuns to copy. At this point, while continuing to tell the story, the Mother Superior had a small wooden box brought to her, which she opened and showed to us. It contained

¹ Certain parts of this article appear in a different form in chapters 1 and 2, and the final note, of my *Spanish American Women's Use of the Word: Colonial Through Contemporary Narratives* and in "Gendered Crime and Punishment in New Spain."

² At the time, I had just come from a research trip that included using the archives in the Discalced Carmelite convent in Valladolid, Spain.

the letter from the Spanish convent and the linen toque from the habit they had sent, in perfect condition—the only piece of the original not eaten by moths in the intervening centuries. The contemporary Puebla nuns treasure this box and its contents as confirmation of Saint Teresa's special favor for their convent, as an example of her miraculous nature, and as an illustration of their select place in the Discalced Carmelite and Catholic world. The story suggests both the intimate connection that these women maintain with their Order's history and the particular bonds across the Atlantic between Sisters in the Old and New Worlds. The box contains lessons for contemporary scholars of women's writing regarding the links between timelessness and time, allegiances across time and space, the materiality of the miraculous, attachments to the body and what covers it as an element of spirituality, and the continuity of women's culture.

The Power and the Glory of the Third Sex

Religious life enabled some (mostly elite) early modern women, including those of Spain and Spanish America, to achieve a certain amount of freedom, within significant limits. Contemporary critics have made much of selected nuns's ability to circumvent and subvert cultural norms of gendered superiority and inferiority that placed women closer than men to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Concepts such as Jean Franco's "interpretative power" and Alison Weber's "rhetoric of femininity" have provided frameworks within which to further our understanding of the specific methodologies and content through which these women defined themselves as religious subjects, rhetorically subordinated to God, not to earthly rulers. Our examination of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century women's experiences, feelings, ideas, and thoughts about religion necessarily begins with their written words.

During the early modern period, writing was an important vehicle through which women might establish some authority, partly although not entirely freed of gendered norms and submission to clergymen.³ Some male ecclesiastics and female colleagues identified and described nuns's exemplarity as "virility." They extolled the select few as spiritual paradigms. Confessors occasionally were persuaded or insisted that the mystical trances of their favored Daughters

³ Kathryn McKnight discusses the gendered difference between the creative *autor* (male) and mechanical *escritor* (woman) during this period (38).

be recorded and explained, despite (and sometimes because of) the dangers of coming under inquisitional scrutiny. Probably most hoped that their association with women defined as models of orthodox religiosity would have the effect of endorsing them also as praiseworthy Catholic subjects.

In order for religious women to establish themselves as the ideal put forth by male advocates, they needed to separate from socially constructed womanhood. That so many—and we still have little idea of how many—were able to accomplish this was nothing short of a miracle. In some very concrete ways, nuns projected themselves as a “third gender,” which functioned as a safety valve for women. Considered neither men nor women, they lived lives less circumscribed than those of most secular women. Women religious, although not men, transcended their womanness.

Emotionally nuns were women, but they channeled feelings of love and connection, as well as anger, into sacred figures, confessors, and members of their community. Intellectually they were women, yet while most appeared to use their privileged background, with its training and education, to forward the aims of the ecclesiastic hierarchy, at the same time they carved out a space of their own. And spiritually, though they were women and therefore supposed to be guided by male clergy, they experienced mystical union with God.

Physically of course they were women, but dress and vows of chastity and obedience, even more than poverty, ensured control over the overt appearance of femaleness.⁴ Further, the penitences which some practiced provoked amenorrhea. Combined with vows of chastity, behavior such as flagellation and continuous fasting ensured that biological signs of womanhood would disappear. Although according to some claims a not insignificant number of religious women gave birth, those who observed more than the outward appearance of sanctity would not reproduce.

As persons who were “dead to the world,” nun authors who wrote in a social context that attached shame to the body, especially the female body, strove for bodilessness, or at least virility, by removing themselves from reproduction, and transforming and sublimating their sexuality through prayer, confession, penitence, and *imitatio*.⁵

⁴ Bilinkoff and Giles have both discussed the controversy over sor María de Santo Domingo’s style of dress, for which she was severely criticized in some ecclesiastic quarters.

⁵ “Imitatio” here refers to pain and suffering that seek to emulate Jesus’s Passion, his crucifixion.

There were very real, concrete limits on early modern religious women's subjectivity. It was at great emotional and physical cost that women religious authors expressed themselves. Yet the cost of not writing may have been still greater. As Mary Elizabeth Perry has shown, the dominant social, economic, and political systems of early modern Spain reinforced women's dependence. In such a society, religious life must have seemed in many ways advantageous. Above all, to serve God in such an obvious fashion allowed for a mingling of conformity and nonconformity. Yet one almost unexamined area of study, with such exceptions as the growing body of work on sor Juana, is the written expression of women religious dissatisfied with their fate *as women*. Even the discontent of secular writers is just beginning to be discovered, except, of course, for María de Zayas. Perhaps we simply lack documents. Or perhaps we need better tools for interpreting subtle and indirect alternative discourses from, for instance, inquisitorial records.

As we develop a more nuanced field of inquiry, I advocate retaining the political quality of our work. We continue to need an overtly feminist intention and methodology committed to questioning androcentric, racist, classist, and heterosexist norms in colonial and Golden Age literary studies. Only then will we gain further complexity of understanding women's written expression. Our inspiration and model is the wooden box, its contents, and the technologies with which it has traveled through time and space, connecting women with each other and with a creative, productive ideology and practice.

The remainder of this essay discusses two seventeenth century women at opposite ends of the social scale, who lived on either side of the Atlantic and who stood in radically different positions vis-à-vis the Catholic church, its dogma, and its officials, but who both admired and emulated Saint Teresa of Avila as a spiritual mother: the Spanish Discalced Carmelite María de san Alberto (1568–1640) and the Mexican mid-seventeenth century *ilusa* Teresa Romero Zapata (c. 1631–?).

While both María de san Alberto and Teresa Romero Zapata attempted to imitate St. Teresa's heroic words and deeds, only one came to be considered a true daughter of her spiritual mother. María de san Alberto achieved mystical status and poetic fame. The language and forms of her writing were educated, products of the intellectual culture in which she was nurtured. Teresa Romero on the other hand became an anti-heroine, a sort of religious *pícaro*, stuck in the quicksand of her time, place, and class. Her rhetorical style, as

transcribed by the inquisitional secretaries, reflected the mundane struggle that marked her life, for survival in the face of poverty and marginalization.

The two women stand in contrast with each other because of their class background, location, and fate. Even so, María de san Alberto and Teresa Romero's lives and work revolve around projections of their admiration of and desire to imitate Saint Teresa. Together they exemplify the range of enactments possible for early modern Hispanic women who sought religious vindication and spiritual fulfillment.

A Spanish Nun of the Generation After St. Teresa: Introduction

For the vast majority of nuns, women who lived their lives in perceived orthodoxy, the example of Saint Teresa of Avila established a Spanish—and Spanish American—prototype. Her life, as represented in her writings and the legends that developed about her, became a how-to manual, a blueprint for maintaining orthodoxy while expressing some aspect of the newly conceptualized self. As Tambling has shown, verbalization of transgressions became a dogmatic requirement in the seventeenth century. A distinctive individuality, one of the defining metaphysical characteristics of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, became necessary in order to articulate responsibility for sin in confession. Saint Teresa's success in negotiating the new mandates suggested a path for early modern women religious, even if the precise direction remained unclear or unavailable to most of her spiritual descendants.

Born fifty-three years after her consecrated mother Saint Teresa, María de san Alberto endeavored to build herself in a theological environment that sought to restrain individuality and force conformity to an ecclesiastically formulated social order. Times had changed. The relative spiritual freedom of the latter part of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth centuries, from which St. Teresa had drawn inspiration, were a distant, dangerous memory.⁶

After the 1559 Index prohibition of religious texts in the vernacular, even Teresa de Jesús no longer had access to the written words that had shaped her thinking. But during her formative years, books such as Francisco de Osuna's *Tercer abecedario espiritual* profoundly

⁶ See Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, for an excellent case study of the city as an example of what she calls "spiritual autonomy" during the first half of the sixteenth century.

influenced the course her life later took. As Weber has so brilliantly demonstrated, especially during the 1560s and 1570s the Founding Mother continued to re-shape her discourse to accommodate increasingly stringent requirements for orthodoxy and progressively broadening definitions of *alumbramiento*. Still, while her lifelong (and posthumous) brushes with the Inquisition compromised her mission, ultimately they did not prevent her from reforming an Order, founding fourteen convents for women and beginning the reform for men, leaving a rich written opus which has continued to be read to this day, and attaining sainthood in record time (forty years after her death).⁷

Circumstances shaped a different life story for María de san Alberto. Born in the year of Saint Teresa's fourth foundation, which happened to be in the future Discalced Carmelite's native city of Valladolid, by the time she entered the monastery in 1589, the scope of actions and words considered tainted with heresy had dramatically widened. Although she was at least partly protected by her brothers, several of whom had exalted positions in the church hierarchy, balancing the demands of orthodoxy, intellect, and mystic ecstasy must have been difficult. Luckily, she had two mothers—one biological and the other spiritual—to point the way along the arduous path. Before her birth mother Cecilia Morillas Sobrino, a well-known humanist in her day, died in 1581, she gave her daughters the rudiments of a humanistic education, training which sor María was to use to great advantage in religious life. In 1582, the woman who was to become her religious mother died. Teresa of Avila left a legacy that the younger nun could and did adapt to her own spiritual and intellectual needs.⁸

Like the founder of the Discalced Carmelites, María de san Alberto emphasized a lived connection between material and spiritual worlds. Unlike St. Teresa, because of her humanist background the younger woman was a painter and musician, as well as a convent leader, mystic, and writer. Recognized and respected in her time for her spiritual fervor, artistic talent, and intellect, she wrote in several genres: poetry, theater, religious didactic prose, chronicles, letters,

⁷ Of St. Teresa's difficulties with the Inquisition, Weber says, "*The Book of Her Life* was in Inquisitorial hands for thirteen years. In 1580 her confessor ordered her to burn her meditations on *The Song of Songs*, and in 1589, seven years after her death, theologians for the Inquisition urged that all her books be burned" (35).

⁸ See Rosa Rossi's biography of St. Teresa for an analysis of how the Avila Mother developed intellectually.

convent documents, and translations. As with many other women from families with access to high culture, she, and her biological sister as well, found an intellectual niche in the convent, a space in which to engage in collaborative work.⁹

María and Cecilia Sobrino Morillas (1570–1646), later María de san Alberto and Cecilia del Nacimiento, grew up, entered the convent, and spent most of their lives side by side. They worked in the convent, wrote, and translated together. Both were mystics, leaders, chroniclers, writers, and fomenters of literature in their community. Petronila de san José, a chronicler of the convent and their contemporary, wrote that they were “unas en el espíritu [...] corrían y volaban el camino de la perfección, que apenas se podía hacer diferencia cuál se aventajaba más en ella [...]”¹⁰ The remark communicates other nuns’ perceptions of the two sisters: they were unique spiritual exemplars for their religious colleagues.

A vision that María de san Alberto is reported as having had during spiritual exercises in 1628, repeatedly transmitted by chroniclers and scholars, exemplifies the intimacy and respect between the two sisters:

via dos brazos larguissimos y muy iguales que me parece salian de la custodia, que no se como pueda yo significar el amor y piedad que en ello venia, y deleitandose la vista interior con ver esto, tambien se deleitaba el oido con estas palabras que dijeron, para *abrazar* a las dos hermanas. (qtd. in Petronila de san José)

The mystic offers a theological interpretation: the two arms are love and piety. Their absolute symmetry indicates that the two feelings are equally important. And significantly, confirmation of María de san Alberto’s exemplarity includes her younger sister. Manifested in the very fact of having the ecstatic encounter, madre María’s paradigmatic status permits the beautiful images that conjure up a feast for the visual and aural senses. The referenced sight and hearing are internal, directed to and from the spiritual realm. The interplay between them results in a spiritual and sensual integration typical of some mystical experiences.

Madre María recounts another vision, from 1635, in which, having asked God to make her sister saintly, he retorts, sounding almost like a father, humorously scolding his child, “que he hecho toda la vida

⁹ See Arenal and Schlau, “‘Leyendo yo y escribiendo ella.’”

¹⁰ The folio pages in Petronila de san José’s manuscript are not numbered.

sino hacerla santa” (283).¹¹ The paternal tone reinforces the ecstatic’s assertion of madre Cecilia as a saint in the making. The advocacy of her blood sister continues in the same section of the notebook with praise of madre Cecilia’s virtues, again affirming the older sister’s love and respect for the younger.

Coming from an intellectual family that sought and achieved status in the church, and that included at least one brother for whom a case for beatification was begun, although never concluded, we can speculate that María de san Alberto wrote down data that would later help with religious procedures.

The author’s notebooks divulged precisely the ways in which her mystical and physical lives interlocked. Topics ranging from mundane quotidian events to the problems of royalty entered into her thematically wide-ranging visionary life. For instance, madre María saw herself as having a talent for healing. Several times she wrote that through visions she succeeded in saving the dying, including the queen, Margaret of Austria.¹² And she exorcised another nun with three words—“que es esto”—and the sign of the cross (274).

Visions sometimes helped her bear or alleviated the physical pain of the palsy she suffered increasingly as she aged. On one occasion, a relic of St. Teresa applied to the aching limb removed the pain as a voice declared, “ya no [h]ay que contar terminos.” She did not tell anyone of the miracle, so when her condition improved dramatically, the doctors and nuns wondered at the quick recovery. The mystic continued, “[...] desde aquel que era el noveno no se contaron mas terminos” (281). Probably the references to “terminos” are a play on words, referring to the limitless powers of the Discalced Carmelite founding Saint. Possibly during madre María’s illness the community of nuns had prayed for her recovery for one or more *novenas*, the period of nine days of prayer. After her cure, she was informed that the deadlines (*novenas*) should be eliminated (“ya no [h]ay que contar terminos”), that the prayers to St. Teresa should not stop. Recounting the event developed and reinforced belief in the healing power of the Saint and showed the sacred mother paying special attention to a favored Daughter who also had curative abilities.

¹¹ All page numbers for María de san Alberto’s texts are from my edition, *Viva al siglo, muerta al mundo*.

¹² Margaret of Austria, born 1584, married Philip in 1599. She gave birth to eight children before dying of complications in childbirth in 1611.

Another example of the breadth of themes in María de san Alberto's mystical life occurred during a legal proceeding that the community undertook against a group of Trinitarian fathers who wished to buy the property next door. After a vision of confirming words came forth from the custody of the holy sacrament (275), madre María, then mother superior, gained certainty that the nuns would win the case. And God told her years before her second election to the position of prioress that she would finish the construction of the convent garden, hermitages, and cells: "tu lo has de acabar" (273).¹³ At times she revealed awareness of political issues, as when she asked God to end a war, and he assented. Finally, after each of her brothers Diego and Sebastián died, she had divine consolation and assurance that they were in heaven, and that the whole Sobrino Morillas family would follow.

The twentieth century Discalced Carmelite chronicler of the Order, Silverio de Santa Teresa, praises María de san Alberto as a worthy disciple of St. Teresa: "[...] en todo, se afanó en seguir de cerca a su santa Madre. Por eso, la estudió mucho [...] en moldes netamente teresianos, fué desenvolviéndose su perfección [...]" (880–81). Father Silverio confirms María de san Alberto's assertion that when the two sisters's writings were sent to Father Alonso de Jesús María, he never returned them. While madre María noted that she remained uninformed about their fate, the twentieth century chronicler announces that they were in fact burned by Father Alonso. Father Silverio vindicates women's authority by taking the mystic's side against church officials who advocated restrictive gender roles: "[...] entonces no sólo él, sino muchos Descalzos eran contrarios a que las religiosas escribieran de tema místico" (889). Given his cognizance of historical reality, Father Silverio's advocacy is not surprising. Moreover, women who belong to history can no longer be counted as dangerous.

St. Teresa in the Poetry: *Virgen madre, Santa española, Capitana, Varona, Doctora y maestra*

María de san Alberto wrote a great many poems celebrating the 1614 beatification and 1622 canonization of the founding Mother, Teresa of Avila. The poetry contributed to Spanish popular support for the worship of Teresa de Jesús as a venerated figure of the church. Most

¹³ María de san Alberto's two terms as mother superior occurred over twenty years apart: 1604–1607 and 1629–1632.

of the poems are collected into one notebook. Composed in a wide variety of metrical forms from both popular and literary traditions—*lira*, *soneto*, *villancico*, *quinta*, *terceto*, *romance*, *pie quebrado*, and *seguidilla*—the majority are written in educated Spanish. Five are not. Two appear in a satiric version of Basque, two in a similar *guineo*, the dialect of African slaves, and one in a Latin far removed from the classical, probably borrowed from oral speech (Schlau 195n.).

At least partly in an effort to uphold a female religious intellectual genealogy, María de san Alberto depicted St. Teresa as a teacher, as well as a spiritual and earthly leader. The portrayals lend complexity to the intriguing tension between the popular meters and the figures of speech and stylistic forms borrowed from the academic culture that she was taught at home. Like sor Marcela de san Félix, Lope's daughter, she could not help but adapt established rules, usages, and conventions to religious verse.

St. Teresa becomes a metaphor, and therefore an agent, of freedom for the literary and spiritual activities of women. She is admired as a mother who is virgin and teacher, strong and capable of leading both women and men: "Virgen de virgines guia / madre de varones fuertes" (133). The poet affirms the multiple roles that the Saint plays as mother and founder of the Carmelites. In two lines she declares her, "Teresa, virgen sabia gran propheta / y del Carmelo madre tan perfe[c]ta" (107), thus fitting together the roles of virgin, mother, wise woman, and prophet into a complete package that promotes Teresa of Avila as the best of all possible women. She especially names her virgin mother, sometimes of men, often tying that status to the foundation of the reformed Carmelite Order: "santa virgen y madre del monte Carmelo" (163) and "y si es grandeza ser madre / virgen, y reformadora / de varones fundad[o]ra" (134).

The poet emphasizes the similarities between the Virgin Mary and St. Teresa. Both virgins, each is also an immaculate wife and mother. Thus, when she claims, "virgen Teresa de Jesus esposa / y madre del Carmelo venturosa" (104), she implicitly joins the Saint with the Holy Family, and especially with Mary, another virgin and mother. The implication is made explicit in lines such as "pues la virgen Maria / es de Teresa y todos Madre y guia" (119); and "La madre de Jesus y del Carmelo / a Teresa su hija hoy ensalça" (121). Since in these lines St. Teresa is the daughter of the mother of God, she is also Jesus's sister. When the poet writes, "Hija de la virgen madre / de Dios [...]" (179) or "Es la virgen Maria madre y Señora / del Carmelo, y Teresa su fundadora" (152), she underscores the family relationship between

St. Teresa and the Virgin Mary. A refrain in one of the most enchanting poems in this collection attributes to both women the two qualities usually reserved for one: “Si Teresa es virgen / mi madre es tambien / que ser virgen y madre / la viene muy bien” (198) adding at the end, as though the Virgin Mary should be compared to St. Teresa rather than the other way around, “la virgen Maria / que madre tambien / que ser virgines madres / las viene muy bien” (199).

When the Discalced Carmelite reiterates the personal filial debt to Teresa of Avila, that relationship brings the writer closer to the founder’s sanctity: “Dichosa yo [...] al fin soy hija de mi madre sancta / Teresa de Jesus [...]” (105). While we do not know with certainty whether the poet here celebrates her profession or St. Teresa’s canonization, the immediacy of feeling in the poetic voice means that even contemporary readers share the author’s joy. Lines like these supply us with a strong sense of the intimate connection that the author must have felt with the founding mother. They provide an emotional frame for the nationalist, religious enterprise of canonizing Teresa de Jesús.

The gendered politics of canonization meant utilizing nationalistic fervor to support the petition for sainthood. Patron saint of Spain, St. Teresa is avowedly Spanish: “Es santa Teresa / patrona de España” (98), “España agradecida / esta [...] la española Teresa / le alcanzara de Dios su fiel promesa” (124–125), and “Madre y luz de Carmelo, blason de España” (162). The Sobrino Morillas family was deeply involved in the campaign for Teresa of Avila to achieve canonized status. Certainly, at the same time that they endorsed a *conversa* for the role, they supported their own claims to exemplarity in the church. The two sisters in particular, María de san Alberto and Cecilia del Nacimiento, advocated for each other as they produced written tributes to their spiritual mother, underscoring their own efforts at the same time that they promoted the Carmelite reform.

Forceful enough to engage in activities generally considered appropriate for men, St. Teresa sometimes heads an army of Spaniards and saints with the warlike fervor that characterized the Spanish enterprise in the New World. The poet claims that she is, “Alferez capitana / del capitán (Jesus) [...]” (125) and “que una muger valerosa / ha vencido una gran guerra” (168). María de san Alberto acknowledges the rarity of a woman taking on these roles, but insists on the Saint’s remarkable combination of skills: “ser fuerte, valeroso, y muy constante / que en femenil sujeto, con proezas / descubre sus grandezas / mas fuertes, ricas, claras, quel diamante” (107). The

rhyme scheme and syllabification here suggest that proper form is paramount for the nun-poet. In the *redondilla*, the poet echoes the round structure with a conceptual circle. The first series of adjectives agree with “subjeto” and therefore appear in the masculine, reflecting widely accepted notions about masculinity: fuerte, valeroso, constante. The second series appears in the feminine, which agrees with “grandezas”: fuertes, ricas, claras. But the descriptive enumeration repudiates dominant ideas about femininity.

María de san Alberto repeatedly inverts and rejects the trope of female moral and physical weakness, accentuating the Saint’s extraordinary stature. Twice she explicitly challenges dominant gendered stereotypes by first enunciating standard clichés, then offering a counter: “y que mayor misterio / que una muger (figura de flaqueza) / desde su monasterio / fundase tal grandeza / que en figura y en obra es fortaleza” (125) and “el cielo y la tierra se asombran / De ver una muger flaca / ser tan fuerte y valerosa” (170). In lines such as, “vencio los tres enemigos / que a las almas atormentan / el mundo, demonio y carne / llevando cruz por vandera” (168), she upsets the traditional association of the world, the devil, and the flesh with womanhood, by making the enemies of the trio genderless (las almas) and by asserting that a woman (St. Teresa) conquered them.

Repetition of “varón” emphasizes the Saint’s moral valor and distance from socially constructed womanhood: “La mujer varon fuerte” (164); “Tu pecho varonil fuerte animoso” (103); Teresa una muger varon divino” (111); “Varona que a varones haveys dado / ser fuerte y varonil, varonilmente” (114); and “que la varonil Teresa / gano por ser valerosa” (179). Hermaphroditic imagery highlights St. Teresa’s impressive qualities: she had opened up a space for a new kind of prayer and religiosity, her weapons of choice, so evocative that even heterodox elements had to be accepted. The saint fights like a man, while leading women into spiritual combat: “Y si solo varones / pretendieran vencer no fuera tanto / mas vencen, esquadrones / de virgines, que espanto / causa su valor fuerte y pecho santo” (126). Obviously, the image of the Saint of Avila battling heroically for the holy cause brings women into the godhead.

St. Teresa as poetic figure also usurps masculine intellectual space. The author calls her “doctora,” often explicitly postulating a gender bending challenge to church and universities through the linguistic twist of linking “doctora” with explicitly male nouns such as “patriarcha”: “Doctora en hechos y obras / en escritos y consejos” (96), she writes, “Propheta y doctora” (94), and “Patriarcha divina /

prudente doctora” (163), not only a church father, but divine as well, “y doctora llamada / en el cielo y la tierra confirmada” (130). Confirmation by the Carmelite Order ensues: “A Teresa en la montaña / dan con borla de Doctora” (192).

The repetition of “doctora” accentuates St. Teresa’s role as teacher. She even instructs men, men with academic diplomas in theology, considered the queen of the sciences and, as sor Juana discovered, not within the purview of women: “Doctora que a los doctores / enseña el fundamento / de toda ciencia divina / con divino y sabio acuerdo” (184). Teresa of Avila also trains the men who are teachers of other components of religion: “La maestra de maestros / de oracion alta y divina / esta [h]oy leyendo al mundo / una lection muy subida” (175). Ultimately, the Saint’s pedagogical ability earns her the praise of gender reversal: “si gran milagra te muestras / un muger hombres adiestras” (205).¹⁴

Further elaboration of St. Teresa’s role as an intellectual religious leader comes from the use of variations of “sabia” and “sabiduría” to refer to the founding mother and her works. When the poet eloquently writes, for instance, “Quien hallara muger fuerte / como esta virgen gloriosa / sabia, prudente, y hermosa” (142), she imitates, only to knock down, the disbelief that must have followed from the demonstration of combined strength, virginity, wisdom, prudence, and beauty in her spiritual mother. The poet avails herself of an old metaphor—drawing the curtain to discover the light of day—in a new way, by linking that clarity with the Saint’s theological knowledge: “Con la sciencia divina / y sabiduria / descubrio la cortina / de aquel claro dia” (155–56). And she insists on St. Teresa’s place as a church luminary, based on the wisdom that must be counted as female, even if only by the gender of the nouns and adjectives: “su sabia do[c]trina” (163), “luciendo en primer lugar / su sabiduria divina” (165), and “Este titulo que encierra / ser docta sabia y prudente” (192).

Especially when attempting to sketch St. Teresa’s *virtud y santidad*, madre María expresses a rhetorical inadequacy. The author’s struggle to extract eloquence from words ends in expressive lines that resonate with religious and poetic formulae. Her Renaissance verse

¹⁴ The lines describing St. Teresa as a wise church doctor and those cited earlier, when she is portrayed as a general in battle may allude to the conflict in the Order that erupted after St. Teresa’s death. María de san Alberto’s account of heroic deeds always includes women, at a time when male leaders of the Order, most notably Nicalao Doria, wanted to exclude women from the Carmelite reform. The insistence on the founding mother’s virtues reinforces the case for inclusion.

has the charms of reversal and hyperbolic invention: “Cancion, deten el curso, en la creçida / fuerza y virtud del trono y su pujanza / [...] cessa, pluma, pues tu [e]scribir desdora / la gloria desta sancta fundadora” (104–05) and, from another poem, “Cancion para, tu curso deteniendo / no passes adelante, escucha, y calla / dentro en el coraçon, suave, amena / que como voz de Dios en el se halla / la pluma que velozmente [e]scriviendo / pues aun no ha comenzado, su presura / reserve, para nueva coyuntura” (110). Here the paradoxes of the written words that tarnish rather than gild and the song that must be quieted in order to hear the voice of God highlight St. Teresa’s sanctity.

The impossibility of expressing the Saint’s eminence appears twice in another metaphor. The author writes, borrowing from an old religious motif, possibly St. Jerome on Paula, “Mill lenguas que tubiera / las quissiera emplear en este officio” (124) and “No [h]ay quien pueda en la tierra / con lengua mortal / descubrir lo que encierra / su rico caudal” (155). In the first of these two excerpts, the poetic voice expresses an oratorical deficiency: she desires above all to speak St. Teresa’s praise, but cannot. In the second, she widens the scope: no human being can help but remain voiceless in the face of the exalted subject.¹⁵

Combining literary and religious purposes, María de san Alberto offered a vision of a new kind of mother for herself and her Sisters. Even more, she attempted to situate the Saint in history, through poetry. Because genres were so strictly segregated and so hierarchalized, she might develop poetically a female religious genealogy and not have to be taken seriously, except by those who chose to do so. María de san Alberto, like Teresa de Jesús, discovered a spiritual and intellectual home within the Carmelite Order. The poetry to the founding mother was ultimately also a vehicle for the poet’s self-expression. Spiritual daughter of the founder of a new Order who had already become the patron saint of Spain, whose written texts, once controversial, had become respected, María de san Alberto exercised her talents through the admiration and imitation of her sacred mother, Teresa de Jesús.

¹⁵ Sor Marcela de san Félix, another nun-author from an intellectual family, exclaims in her “Otro romance a la soledad,” “¡Quién hablara dignamente, / con lengua humana y tardía, / de tus grandes perfecciones, / agrado y soberanía!” (Arenal and Schlau 281; Arenal and Sabat-Rivers 466).

A Poor Imitation of St. Teresa (in Mexico): Teresa Romero Zapata

In the Spanish Americas, socially normative behavior for individuals in differing sectors was regulated in great part by the church through its juridical arm, the Inquisition. This was especially true of its two headquarters in Mexico and Peru. Founded in New Spain in 1571, the *Santo Oficio* reinforced a culture of fear, despite lack of resources. People's daily lives, thoughts, hopes, dreams, and fears were subject to inquisitional scrutiny. Free will counted. Indeed, its use defined each individual as a sinner or a saint. Hence the new concept of self that I spoke about earlier was required, in order to recognize and articulate sin. Many scholars have pointed out that "Thoughts as well as actions counted [...]" (Lavrin 52). As Lavrin has further noted, "This stress on freedom to choose between good and bad was central to the definition of sin. Sin is the voluntary—thus knowledgeable—breach of the rules of behavior set by the church, leading to the loss of divine grace by the soul" (50).

The general objective of regulating orthodoxy and rooting out heterodoxy necessitated action on individual and social levels. This meant that the stated purposes of confessional and inquisitional interrogation were remarkably similar and required analogous techniques, similar questions and answers about thoughts and behaviors. The act of confessing to a spiritual director approximated that of testifying before church judges. A complex language for confession, which was also used in the courts of the *Santo Oficio*, had emerged by the seventeenth century. This speech altered "[...] the emphasis from [...] repentance [...] and changed it to discipline.[...] It stressed not the ritual but the abiding nature of repentance, that it was for all the year round [...]" (Tambling 71–72).

Spiritual examination of individuals was always connected to the great economic, social, and racial tensions, contained in a fragile balance in colonial Mexican society. Divisions along class and race lines, themselves closely linked, were strictly enforced. An elaborate race and gender classification system determined the social category to which a given person belonged. Mostly regulated by the Inquisition, ostensibly religious criteria for the behavior of individuals in differing sectors disclosed social realities. As Klor de Alva has maintained, "In the New World the history of the Inquisition is primarily the story of the struggles over power and truth that marked the changing fortunes of the various ethnic, racial, and social sectors" (8).

Women constituted 20–30% of all inquisitional indictments in New Spain, but only about 16% of the total cases that came to trial had women defendants (Alberro 19). Gender stereotyping was one reason for the relatively lower rates of arrest of women. Since church officials considered the female gender inferior, they frequently ignored women's witchcraft, or love magic, as a product of ignorance and superstition, rather than a heresy inspired by the devil (Alberro 21).¹⁶ Yet urban *criolla* women of the lower classes were particularly subject to the charge of *ilusión*, for which many were brought before the ecclesiastic tribunal in Mexico City.

Dominant values about women's bodies, internalized even by women accused by inquisitional officials, as well as religious myth, contributed in specific ways to *ilusas'* attempts to gain "interpretive power." Generally, but not always, *ilusas* publicly exhibited and occasionally even sold strange manifestations from their bodies, which they claimed were miracles affirming their holiness. Often they were associated with a cleric who supported them. While almost everyone lived under the direction of a confessor, some *ilusas* were under more immediate control of men. Not simply confessants, they might even live in a spiritual director's house.¹⁷

Social norms were predicated on male power over women and violence was an outcome of that power. Thus women, especially women without the resources of the oligarchy, had much to fear. The gendered situational dynamics of all echelons of society consistently circumscribed women's movements and methods of expressing themselves. Steve Stern's comment about late colonial Mexico is also true of the seventeenth century. He remarks that "The premise of social order and authority at both the family and the polity levels of society was an organic hierarchy that vested power in fathers and elders, both literally and metaphorically" (315). Priests were, of course, fathers in their role as spiritual guides, as well as elders because of the authority vested in them as church officials. *Ilusas* who functioned outside established norms and rules constituted a threat to this patriarchy.

The many folios of the *Acusación* against Teresa Romero Zapata, who called herself Teresa de Jesús, are prime examples of how gendered notions of access to power and legitimacy operated in the colonial church. Extracts of her inquisitional trial, which lasted a full

¹⁶ See Behar for an explanation of these practices and the official response to them.

¹⁷ An example of this practice comes from the combined inquisitional cases against María Lucía Celis and María Rita Vargas.

decade, from 1649–1659, were published in the mid twentieth-century. They contain three principal points of view: some of the accused's testimony mixed with sermons by the judges, a chronicle of meetings she requested over the course of the years she spent in jail, and the *Acusación* by the prosecuting attorney. This hybrid text, based on transcripts by ecclesiastic secretaries, is linguistically heterogeneous. Although we do not know with certainty that the words of the accused were transcribed accurately, the meticulousness and obsession with detail for which the inquisitional scribes were noted probably resulted in a precise rendering.

Born in Cholula and a resident of the capital, the self-styled Teresa de Jesús came from a poor family. Her three sisters also took religious names: the twins became Josefa de san Beltrán and María de la Encarnación, and the younger Nicolasa de santo Domingo. They were all arrested for feigned ecstatic experiences. Their father, Juan Romero Zapata, a *labrador* who had been thrown out of their home town of Tepetlaotoc for stealing from Indians (407), and a would-be priest, advertised the trances. Class status heavily influenced the direction taken by the Romero Zapata family. Even the prosecutor remarked that the accused engaged in the activities he named illusory “para salir de la miseria en que estaba” (404).

A priest who believed in the saintliness of the Romero Zapata sisters aided them. He attempted to transcribe, word for word, everything Josefa de san Beltrán said during “*raptos*,” and even began a treatise on the subject in 1648 (37). Father Bruñón developed a theory and system of mysticism to describe two kinds of ecstasies: the *vocal*, characterized by badly pronounced words in Spanish and Latin and the *continuado*, during which the person was outwardly silent and could not control muscular movements. The Romero sisters all adhered to this framework in recounting their own *raptos*.

While it must have been difficult for these marginalized women not to fall into an exaggerated religiosity—Mexico and Peru were noted for it—their behavior flew directly in the face of the system prescribed by St. Teresa, who would not have sanctioned their actions. She had redefined *arrobamiento* by separating physicality and verbalization from mystical union and interior prayer precisely in order to remove the taint of heterodoxy.

Of the Mexican Teresa de Jesús's life the transcript gives some specific details. She claimed to be eighteen years old when she was arrested. We know her genealogy and the low opinion that the inquisitors and prosecutor had of the family. The Romero Zapatas

came to Mexico City in 1645, where they lived in a house “con suma miseria y pobreza” (408). Teresa Romero was said to have had two love relationships. The judges and prosecutor disapproved of both on racial grounds, belittling one partner as an “*indizuelo*” and the other as a “*mesticillo*.” A child was born from each.

Through religious books and priests’s words, Teresa Romero was acquainted with the lives and work of Catherine of Siena (401), Ana María de san José (388), Marina de Cristo (393), and Teresa of Avila (388, 407). These holy women of Italy and Spain had exerted a great deal of power and influence during their lives and were widely imitated throughout the early modern period. Teresa Romero attempted to emulate them in three principal ways: by writing a *vida*, wearing religious dress, and displaying mystical trances. Romero simulated and perhaps had even heard parts of St. Teresa’s Life read.¹⁸ She dared to dictate a *vida*. Since she claimed that although she had taught herself to read, she did not know how to write, her father and other men served as secretaries. Having a spiritual autobiography might cement the contention of holiness. If the account of her life were vindicated, as St. Teresa’s finally had been, then her orthodox exemplarity might be guaranteed. But when the notebook was shown to a priest, he ordered it burned. The transcribed words of the trial reveal deep ecclesiastic rage. Inquisitional officials abhorred the audaciousness of Romero’s wanting her life recorded, and even more, her boldness in telling her (male) scribes what to write, when she herself was illiterate and a woman. She had reached for too much subjectivity. Unfortunately, she achieved not what she must have wished for, but rather historical notoriety.

Part of the subjectivity she sought was constructed on the desire to copy Saint Teresa. Having been given the name Teresa at birth, with the alias Teresa de Jesús she sought to emulate the Saint of Avila even more closely. Once the saint’s canonization had been achieved, people were given permission for a wide variety of actions, thoughts, and feelings. While St. Teresa was only officially given the title of Doctor of the Church very recently, for instance, practitioners of popular religion began naming her *doctora* immediately after her death. María de san Alberto’s poetry was part of an effort that spread the *doctora* and *maestra* legend, lore that Teresa Romero, who sought approval for unorthodox behavior, incorporated into her spiritual

¹⁸ Oral reading was widely practiced in the seventeenth century.

life. And during a brief period she achieved some acceptance: many called her *santa* (408).

Unable to become a Carmelite nun (she lacked the necessary dowry and probably the social status), Teresa Romero attempted to pattern herself after the most famous Hispanic woman religious of all, not only by taking her name, but also in other ways. For a time she even wore a Carmelite habit (407). Reaching for authority and exoneration, the *acusada* insisted that St. Teresa had communed with her: “[...] que sus acciones, obras y palabras iban todas desde el cielo guiadas y enderezadas por Santa Teresa de Jesús [...] y la llevaba a que viere el convento de sus religiosas de esta ciudad” (422). She sought—some might argue, created—the Saint’s maternal authority. The Carmelite mother authorized her temporary, but repeated entrance into a forbidden space. She could peek into the lives of “real” nuns. But she, and many others of her class, race, space, and time, could not remain.

Teresa Romero’s poverty and search for spiritual perfection constituted an ideal toward which all saints and holy persons strived. The question of why she was deemed heterodox despite the similarities to those judged exemplars by the church rested upon a social foundation: inevitably *imitatio* was intimately connected to power hierarchies to which Romero had no access, and to societal structures in which she was marginalized.

In the *Acusación*, the prosecutor reviews the complaints and evidence against the prisoner. His concluding summary of the charges asserts that she has “[...] seguido la secta de los perversos alumbrados y tenido pacto con el demonio, y de embustera, sacrilega, perjura, ficta revocante y simulada confitente, ladrona y estafadora a título de santa y favorecida de Dios [...]” (434). Notably, such behaviors as lying and stealing are included on the long list, along with *alumbrismo*. Clearly, he links religious heresy, possession by the devil, and *ilusión* to worldly transgressions.

The *fiscal* also alleges that Romero deceived others in order to “encubrir sus deshonestidades, mala vida y costumbres, y robar para salir de la miseria en que estaba, y por envidia y emulación de otra hermana suya” (404). When he utilizes a series of gerunds to list her sins, beginning with “haciéndose predicadora,” in effect he emphasizes the process of self-incrimination. Nun leaders engaged in teaching and preaching all the time. The prosecutor’s first accusation discloses the thin line that women of differing classes walked:

haciéndose predicadora [...] pariendo y mal pariendo, confesando y comulgando [...] engañando a su confesor [...] usando de extraordinarias y maliciosas cautelas para engañar [...] estando [...] con sus padres, hermanas y hermanos, cuya casa era de juego y entretenimiento [...] entrándose esta rea en las casas de los indios [...] siendo constante que un indizuelo pilguanejo [...] la habría estuprado [...]. (405)

Four major themes predominate in this quote: false religious displays such as trances in public, relationships among the sisters, unrestrained sexuality and sexual violence, and the deception of confessors. Here I will discuss the false *raptos*, not only because they show most clearly the intent to imitate St. Teresa but also because the struggle to attain approved mystic union largely determined Romero's life and fate.

The erstwhile holy woman engaged in a wide range of religious activities without inquisitional authorization. Any kind of spiritual project was, of course, strictly regulated. Given her social status, Romero would never have obtained permission, but not to seek inquisitional sanction marked her as an *ilusa*. Nevertheless, she contended that, just like her models, she had had mystical dialogues with many sacred figures.

Romero's visions, as recounted in the *Acusación*, included altercations with the devil; direct communication with God (e.g. 412), Jesus (e.g. 411), Mary, and several saints including Teresa, Michael, and Peter of Alcántara (e.g. 422). Some even offered lessons in mystical theology. During the trances, she handed out indulgences (433), and was given stigmata (418). Miraculous signs of exemplarity, both events were meant to strengthen her case. And, like María de Agreda, she, who had left never Mexico, traveled to Armenia to see Noah's ark, to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to visit the site where Jesus was born; and to Japan, where she predicted she would gain the ultimate missionary reward, dying as a martyr (426).

While at times Romero engaged in long conversations with holy figures, at others, she remained silent, "*absorta*" for hours or once, nine days at a time (413). Sometimes she returned to childhood in trance, perhaps to reinforce her innocence. The prosecutor, though, had another theory, based on common characterizations of women: "Y para acreditar más su enajenación de sentidos y potencias, fingía decir todo lo referido con notable sencillez y alegría [...] y hacía los chiqueos, quejidos, pucheritos y lágrimas de una criatura de dos años, llamando a este embuste, rapto continuado [...]" (414). The

presupposition of deception and disparaging language that concretely infantilizes Romero both correspond to standard ideology about women. Romero's daring to designate her trances "*rapto continuado*," the category formulated by padre Bruñón, serves to further damage her cause.

Continuing, the *fiscal* accuses her of several kinds of trickery in the public displays. She repeatedly pretends to be lame, but "[...] estando en estos tullamientos, que ella llamaba rapto amoroso, y arrobada, si le daban alguna cosa, luego al instante se destullía [...]" (415).¹⁹ The blood that flows from her mouth, because, she says, of the force of her *amor divino* is, he says, "alguna bebida colorada" (419). While the "*rapto amoroso*" is patently false, claims the prosecutor, so are the illusions she produces and props she devises to make the spectacle more convincing to the audience. These modes of behavior brought Teresa Romero Zapata a great deal of attention, in the form of money, gifts, and local fame, which, unfortunately for her, probably led to the interest of the Holy Office.

During her testimony, Romero availed herself of a tried and true tactic: she claimed to suffer from amnesia or ignorance. Early in the proceedings she testified that: "[...] no se acuerda de cosa de las pasadas porque como eran fingidos los raptos, en habiendo pasado no se acordaba después de nada de lo que había dicho" (55). Since she presumed she was in prison because of the scandal caused by the false visions, she denied prior knowledge that she had sinned, asserting that "[...] si supiera que era pecado grave o caso que tocaba a este Santo Tribunal, no lo hubiera hecho [...]" (62). Thus she constructed a case for mercy, built on the claim that she did not know she had sinned, and its logical corollary, that if she had known she would not have done what she did. Therefore, she begged for and expected leniency from the judges: "[...] cuando con malicia y conocimiento de esto hubiera pecado [...] se hubiera entrado por las puertas de la misericordia de este Santo Tribunal a pedirla, como la ha pedido y de nuevo la pide" (62). Even if she had known she sinned, she asserted, she would have come forward to ask the same judges for compassion.

Further on, Romero responded to the prosecutor's attacks, but briefly and weakly, as if to confirm that he was right, a stance that her court-appointed attorney encouraged. Ill and weak from a decade in prison, it is no wonder that she tried out the rhetoric of capitulation

¹⁹ See also p. 413.

on those who held the power of the ecclesiastic machinery. For instance, she hesitantly put forth, “[...] que podía ser que hubiese cometido algunos de los delitos que en dicha acusación se decían contra ella, pero que no los había cometido con malicia [...]” (435). And, she admitted to having had a pact with the devil, but only because of his persuasive arts: “[...] que el demonio la persuadía a que tuviese pacto con él [...]” (437). The tactic backfired: her implicit reliance on the gendered explanation that women were more easily tempted to sin and so were more closely associated with the world, the flesh, and the devil turned out to confirm the dominant ideological stance of women’s inferiority.

A judgment typical in New Spain for those (women) found guilty of *ilusión* was proclaimed in 1659, a decade after the initial arrest. Teresa Romero Zapata was prohibited from using the name Teresa de Jesús, forbidden to associate with her former colleagues or to read books that might encourage false trances, allowed only a confessor appointed by the inquisitors, required to participate in an *auto de fe*, paraded through city streets with other convicted prisoners half-naked on a donkey or some other beast of burden, and sent to work in a hospital for ten years, after which she was banished from Mexico City and Tepetlautoc and their environs (440–41). Because of her poor health, the judges withheld the execution of their sentence of two hundred lashes during the public display, although the whip was draped across her back (442). Public punishment for Teresa Romero and others like her “functioned as an educational ritual of inquisitorial power” and served another goal, “to avoid social transgression, disequilibrium, and rupture” (Quezada 50, 51). Inquisitorial officials therefore deemed such demonstrations essential.

Further information about the fate of Teresa Romero Zapata, alias Teresa de Jesús, has not been uncovered. Her attempted emulation of Saint Teresa ultimately failed. The exaggerated, apparently distorted manifestation of saintliness led to her downfall. Despite the punishment, like Satan she remained unredeemed. Unlike him, her crime was the desire to achieve recognized holiness while at the same time earning a living. In spite of obstacles, Saint Teresa came close to achieving her goals. But her colonial Mexican imitator was too distant chronologically, geographically, and socially from her spiritual mother to wear the Carmelite habit, except as a violation of orthodoxy, or to live the life symbolized by the veil and the robe.

Conclusion

The Catholic church's regulation of pious expectations and aspirations in early modern Spain and its colonies was, to say the least, convoluted. The elaboration of orthodoxy depended as much upon social criteria as on religious ones. St. Teresa of Avila had carved out a safe passage through the dangers for women. But those who considered themselves her spiritual daughters might become either the beneficiaries or the casualties of ecclesiastic edicts as they followed in her footsteps. The ability to walk down that road was either helped or hindered not only by manipulation of gendered norms, but also by race, class, and geographic location. María de san Alberto profited from access to far more privilege than Teresa Romero Zapata had. A product of the intelligentsia, she had the tools with which to successfully maneuver through the system. Teresa Romero, on the other hand, while she enjoyed shortlived fame and fulfillment, could not hold on to her achievement, because of the weight of her marginalization. Yet both offer a glimpse into how the multiple possibilities for religious self-affirmation that St. Teresa of Avila helped to elaborate might be further deployed.

While for the contemporary Discalced Carmelite nuns in Puebla, the wooden box and its contents—knowledge, writing, a material artifact—offer a literal connection across time and space with their founder, their earlier Sisters, and their Order, the box also links scholars of literary, historical, and religious studies with a portion of women's history and uncovers the possibilities available to us in finding noncanonical records of women's words. It remains for us to take up the challenge the box signifies.

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