

## Colonial Latin American Historical Review

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Volume 8

Issue 3 *Volume 8, Issue 3 (Summer 1999)*

Article 8

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6-1-1999

### Kathryn Joy McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo, 1671-1742*

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#### Recommended Citation

Crossen, John F.. "Kathryn Joy McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo, 1671-1742*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 8, 3 (1999): 380. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol8/iss3/8>

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*The Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo, 1671-1742.* By Kathryn Joy McKnight. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. xviii + 284 pp. Illustrations, chart, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

With the publication of this study of the life and work of the Colombian nun, Francisca Josefa de la Concepción, or Madre Castillo, as she is known, Kathryn Joy McKnight has provided English-reading audiences a fascinating introduction to a relatively neglected and misunderstood eighteenth-century writer. For this achievement alone, McKnight merited the Modern Language Association's prestigious Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize for a book in English in the field of Hispanic literatures and cultures, awarded to her at the 1998 convention in San Francisco. Prior to this book, readers would have had to depend on Spanish texts to learn about Madre Castillo's unique contributions to the genre of convent writing. Through McKnight's genuine love for this woman, a wider audience may now meet her and sample a selection of her words in translation.

McKnight represents Madre Castillo as a "strong-voiced" and "strong-willed" woman who carefully negotiates the repressiveness of a male-dominated ecclesiastical culture and the security of an isolated convent in an attempt to express her own voice, her own experience. Madre Castillo is shown to have actively resisted prescribed roles for her writing and to have subverted the expectations of her confessors by inscribing a multiplicity of voices, each pretending submission (or struggling to submit) and each expressing a certain level of authority—whether in the role of God's amanuensis (where she could then explore the revelations given to her, thus "teaching" without seeming to) or telling the story of her spiritual life (where she could articulate an individual identity, conflicted but knowable as distinctly feminine). As she "resists the unity of a submissive Counter-Reformation subjectivity" (p. 129), Madre Castillo emerges in her writings a more complex individual, a Catholic woman writer (and a writer with a clear discernible Self) of South America who deserves equal attention in colonial

studies as her contemporary to the north, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695).

The book is divided into three parts, two of which deal at length with McKnight's theoretical framework and religious and cultural contexts. Here McKnight lays out the tensions and struggles in Latin America at the time to argue persuasively for Madre Castillo's uniqueness as a creative force worthy of study. Once again, the book is really a foundation work for future Madre Castillo studies and for research into late-colonial women's writings, especially in the work being done on what seems to be the predominantly female genre of the *vida espiritual* in Latin America.

If there are weaknesses to McKnight's approach, they are evident in her commentary on medieval women writers and their culture. She tends to overly simplify her portrait of medieval society, rendering it as monolithic; it is reduced to being "static" at one point and "stable" at another. McKnight tries so hard to assert the singularity of the Counter-Reformation world (one depicted as more conflictual) against the Middle Ages, that she is in danger of reducing her analysis to a sort of dualism, not permitting the ambiguities that exist in all times. In addition, as a feminist scholar with a sensitivity to Foucault's discourses of power (especially between males and females), McKnight tends to create dualistic categories for the social position of and outlets of creativity for men and women in these societies. For example, men's subjecthood in the patriarchal church, she argues, derived from "intellectual freedom," while women's subjecthood came from having her intellect "chained." Such language encourages simplistic understandings of complex realities where many male writers experienced fear, dread, and the indignity of paranoid, inquisitorial investigations of their work along with their female contemporaries. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that repression was one of degree in regards to gender, not difference in treatment. Admirably, McKnight is forthright about her biases and editorial method. From the beginning, she names her critical approach and is not hesitant to note when she feels "pain" as a feminist scholar as she studies a female subject "who wins the freedom of her word by elevating herself in both patriarchal and female traditions and who counteracts every elevation with an equally severe punishment" (p. 166).

In the third part, following a brief biography of Madre Castillo, McKnight devotes a chapter to each of her major works: *Su vida*, *Afectos espirituales*, and the *Cuaderno de Enciso*. As she fascinatingly shows, each of these works is a carefully constructed weaving of different voices and traditions. In the *Afectos* and *Cuaderno*, Madre Castillo manipulates scripture and quoted poetry from diverse sources to create a space within which she may teach spirituality and even perform her own liturgies. For Madre Castillo, her manipulations become a "theater of the mystic experience" (p. 179). They also enable her to experiment with feminizing language for God

and Christ and masculinizing language for Mary. In so doing, as McKnight argues, Madre Castillo "diminishes the distance between authority and women" (p. 195). This creativity and boldness with language are hallmarks of Madre Castillo's literary contributions.

*The Mystic of Tunja* accomplishes its goal: to bring to life Madre Castillo as a complex person whose work is itself complex, and in which she has inscribed her multiple voices of conformity and conflict in Counter-Reformation Colombia. Her literary legacy is one of submission and "subtle subversion" encoded in her pages; it is a legacy "in which can be seen the cautious and tortured resistance of a strong-willed woman" whose "voices" still speak to us with intriguing complexity (p. 221).

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