Journeys of a Mystic Soul
in Poetry and Prose

CECILIA DEL NACIMIENTO

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Introduction

CECILIA DEL NACIMIENTO (1570–1646)

A Lost Voice

Unlike the works of many women in the Other Voices series, those of Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570–1646) were unknown for several centuries in any language. Although a few of her poems received critical attention, they were thought to have been written by San Juan de la Cruz and were copied in collections of his work. When scholars in the twentieth century began to study Cecilia’s manuscripts, these misattributed poems were rightfully recognized as conveying a distinctive perspective; and not the ascetic exuberance that characterizes the famous saint’s writing. Cecilia was influenced by San Juan’s mystical works, but her writings have their own distinctive style and visionary power.

Writing in a manner that frequently foregrounds her femininity, she creates a direct, personal relationship between herself and Jesus that borders on the erotic, while remaining within acceptable bounds through her judicious choice of words. Using the well-established trope of marriage, with Jesus as her spouse, Cecilia transforms the heated passion of sexual union into a glorious, overwhelming spiritual experience. Cecilia’s point of view in her mystical transports is that of a devout woman joined in intimate union with a divine spouse. The matrimonial imagery occurring throughout her writing introduces a dynamic intensity with the godhead. Cecilia’s union with Jesus is palpably physical, with all her senses subsumed into the perfect spiritual light of her beloved. In addition to these characteristics, Mother Cecilia’s texts stand out for their stylistic sophistication and familiarity with scripture and contemporary religious writing. This is noteworthy for it belies the common assumption that women in post-Tridentine

1. There are very few publications concerning either the life or works of Cecilia del Nacimiento. Much of the information for this section and for her biography is informed by the doctoral dissertation of Blanca Alonso Cortés, “Dos monjas vallisoletanas poetisas,” (PhD diss., Valladolid: Castellana, 1944).
Spain were not exposed to writings that dealt with matters beyond catechism and thus, did not participate in religious discourse among men.\textsuperscript{2}

Cecilia’s role model in both life and literature was Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), the founder of her order and of her convent in Valladolid, Spain. Saint Teresa’s experience of ecstatic transports aided Cecilia both spiritually and aesthetically; through imitations of the saint’s raptures, she strengthened her faith and found inspiration that moved her to write. Saint Teresa is often explicitly present in Cecilia’s texts, as in this stanza from one of her poems:

\begin{quote}
Finally your perfections—  
who would be able to count them?  
Your virtues and talents  
through which you have become brilliant,  
Let your Lover tell them he knows them.
\end{quote}

Cecilia also chose to represent Saint Teresa as a militant personality, an example of female strength that doubtless sustained her in both her writing and her life. Her texts are not merely a repetition of the mystic saint’s legacy, as they reveal a new dimension of mystical delight, refining the ecstasy of Saint Teresa and enriching the imagery of San Juan. Unlike most women of her day, she was highly educated and well acquainted with the latest literary trends. Both her prose and poetry introduce stylistics characteristic of the Golden Age Baroque, giving her texts a decidedly courtly flavor, even though she wrote mostly for her male spiritual advisors, herself and her sisters in the convent, and not for a larger reading public.

As far as we know, Cecilia made no attempt to publish any of her writings. Given the subject matter of her work and the disputes she had with certain spiritual leaders, exposing her creations to others outside the convent or attempting to have them published during the Counter-Reformation fervor of early seventeenth-century Spain could have been dangerous. After Cecilia’s death, most of her work was for-\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{footnote}
This assumption, common in traditional scholarship for most of the twentieth century, is explained in part by the censorship and control placed on women’s writing in early modern Spain. For more, see p. 5–6 and 9–13 of this introduction.
\end{footnote}
gotten and catalogued in her convent’s archive along with the rest of the community’s varied papers. It was not until the twentieth century that her work came back into circulation. Fragments of her writing and that of her sister’s, along with biographical information, were first presented in English in Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works. This book also discusses, for the first time in English, Cecilia del Nacimiento’s poetry, noting that “she rendered the mystical experience with greater technical proficiency and clarity than most of her male contemporaries.”

**Convent Culture in Early Modern Spain**

Thanks to recent research on convent life in the early modern Hispanic world, we now know that the walls of the cloister did not entirely separate female religious communities from all forms of worldly knowledge or negate their intellectual subjectivity. On the contrary, the convent afforded women a space where they were allowed to exercise a limited amount of control over their own communal existence, and for many women it was not only a place to engage in prayer and meditation but also a haven for intellectual and spiritual exploration. Virtually all convents in Spain required incoming novices to be functionally literate, while others actively encouraged community members to read; and, at times, to write. This was particularly true in the case of the Discalced Carmelite convent in Valladolid that Cecilia and her sister María entered in 1588. Here, daily life was governed by the


4. The last two decades have seen a great deal of work on convent writing and women’s culture. One of the earliest texts to open this fertile field of investigation is Arenal and Schlau, Untold Sisters. See also Silvia Evangelisti, Nuns: A History of Convent Life, 1450–1700. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sherrin Marshall, ed., Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Ronald E. Surtz, Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Ávila (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); José Luis Sánchez Lora, Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988); and Stephanie Merrim, Early Modern Women’s Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).
guidelines for reform that Saint Teresa of Ávila drafted a few decades before their arrival.

The Carmelite Order was founded during the middle of the twelfth century, but by the middle of the sixteenth century the Catholic Church throughout Europe was reformed from both within and outside contemporary church structures. One of the most widely experienced reforms was a critical reassessment of each religious order’s culture. As numerous detractors attacked the status quo of the Roman Catholic Church, virtually all its different religious orders began to examine the ways in which their rules and conduct had changed over time, as well as the rigor with which these rules were applied in the order’s academic pursuits and daily life. Catholic reformers across Europe called for a return to medieval asceticism and a limitation of the intellectual liberty afforded by the influence of Renaissance humanism, anticipating the increasing orthodoxy promulgated by the Council of Trent (1545–63). In Spain, Saint Teresa of Ávila was by far the most vocal critic and active reformer of the Carmelite Order, but her project of reform did not consist only of a return to the order’s “traditional values.” When she observed community leaders’ laxity concerning the order’s laws and their indulgence in earthly pleasures, she spoke out in indignation, yet she did not believe that simply tightening enforcement would improve the quality of each religious person’s life or aid in each soul’s ultimate goal of salvation. Instead she established a new, more rigorous branch of the order, the Discalced Carmelites. The new name, which means “unshod” or without shoes, reflects the austerity and asceticism that Teresa and other reformers like her throughout Europe hoped to establish. The Discalced required community members to lead a life of intense prayer and to embrace poverty, chastity, obedience, and solitude in the hope of in-

5. From Lutheranism and Calvinism in northern Europe to alunbradismo and crypto-Judaism in Spain, the Roman Catholic Church was assailed with numerous threats to its hegemony. See below for more details.

At first glance, the reforms introduced by Saint Teresa seem entirely in line with the Catholic Church’s increasingly conservative—not to mention misogynistic—politics. Convinced that contemporary challenges to the church’s authority were ultimately the result of a lack of rigor and enforcement of its instruction, church leaders sought to limit all citizens’—and particularly women’s—opportunities for education and expression of personal autonomy. Consequently, in Teresa’s proposals all sisters were expected see themselves as servants to the church’s needs, as “negated subjects,” just as all wives were expected to put their husbands’ needs ahead of their own. Beyond that, her reforms called for a greater separation between the cloistered sisters and the outside world, thus seeming to check the religious women’s potential contributions to the living community of the church. Yet paradoxically, Saint Teresa’s emphasis on rigor and asceticism ultimately broadened the sisters’ power within the new order. To begin with, the very fact that the new order was founded and controlled by a woman was itself a remarkably novel—and for many church conservatives, quite threatening—idea for the time. And though Saint Teresa viewed the events beyond the convent walls as dangerous and corrupt, she did not believe that separation from the outside world should lead to the community’s ignorance of current events. To begin with, Saint Teresa’s mission led her all over the Iberian Peninsula. The seemingly meek and fragile woman from Ávila often went on her travels unaccompanied by men and necessarily became involved with the unique political circumstances of the areas in which she founded new convents. Though she eschewed the corruption of the outside world, Teresa envisioned her sisters’ removal from society and immersion in prayer and sacrifice as a means to strengthen the Catholic Church.

7. Though attitudes regarding women’s education varied over the course of the sixteenth century, women’s subordinate position in all cultural matters was never put into question. Debates and discussions centered on the degree to which women should be educated, but this degree was always necessarily less than what would be recommended for men. For more on women and education in the sixteenth century, see María Teresa Cacho, “Los moldes de Pygmalión: sobre los tratados de educación femenina en el Siglo de Oro,” in La mujer en la literatura española, ed. Emilie Bergmann, et al. (Madrid: Comunidad de Madrid, 1995), 2:177–213.
in society and fortify its influence in all earthly matters. Thus, all the convent's members had to be aware of contemporary challenges to the church's authority in order to pray effectively for its triumph.

Other innovations within the order also challenged the status quo. The Discalced’s disregard for incoming novices’ “purity of blood,” its dedication to an egalitarian existence within the community, and its disruption of traditional economic ties and church hierarchies subtly reorganized contemporary notions of community and simultaneously questioned male leadership within a female order. Adversaries of these reforms claimed that each community’s increased autonomy was symptomatic of Protestantism and dangerous because of the power it placed in women’s hands. These detractors of Saint Teresa argued for a change in the order’s management and a cessation of its expansion. Yet perhaps more significant than all the aforementioned changes is the fact that this new Carmelite Order required its female members to define and manage their own spiritual journeys. Discalced convents prescribed reading for all their members. In fact, reading made up a great deal of the nuns’ daily lives of meditation and prayer. In addition, the Discalced sisters wrote detailed histories of convent foundations, letters, poetry, music, short and long dramatic pieces, and biographies of other sisters, which they circulated among different convents within the order. Though all textual production was monitored and shaped by superiors, including male clergy and confessors, the Discalced sisters nevertheless created a community of female readers and writers that at times provided profoundly unique and daring interpretations of spirituality. Cecilia del Nacimiento’s writing is a perfect example of how creative thinking and expression flourished within the convent environment.

8. With the rise of strict orthodoxy and anxiety regarding diversity and signs of otherness, Spanish cultural institutions were not content only to require that their members be mere Christians. On the contrary, “true” faith became tied to one’s blood: having Jewish or Muslim ancestry—despite one’s conversion to Christianity—was seen as an indicator of a potential atavism that might contaminate the social body. Conversos (converted Jews) and moriscos (converted Muslims) were always regarded as a potential source of disease and impurity and often blocked from entering certain religious institutions and from emigrating to Spain’s colonies overseas. Given Spain’s enormously diverse ethnic and religious make-up, falsifying bloodlines to prove one’s worth was common. Ironically, Saint Teresa herself—the female patron saint of the Spanish nation—came from a converso family.
The Discalced Order’s increased asceticism did not prevent it from fomenting a burgeoning tradition of female education that had begun in the decades before the tumultuous years of its foundation. By the time Saint Teresa established the new order in 1568, official church and state policies on female education had already begun a vast regime of curtailment. In response to the Protestant Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, as well as many other related heresies throughout Europe, the Roman Catholic Church imposed a series of measures agreed upon at the Council of Trent that sought to enforce orthodoxy in education and place all Christian subjects under strict surveillance. In addition, Spain’s conquest of New World territories and interactions with the formerly unknown indigenous populations raised many new debates about human nature and education, most of which concluded that a heavy hand and strict limitation of autonomy was the only viable Christian option. This was particularly true in relation to those whom the church characterized as society’s “weaker” individuals: women, the lower classes, and non-Europeans.\(^9\) With the church’s image recast as a conqueror on the offensive, faced with myriad enemies, a new cultural climate of fear, suspicion, and domination emerged, so that Cecilia and her sister Maria enjoyed much less intellectual freedom than their mother’s generation.

Cecilia Morillas, the mother of Cecilia and María, serves as a perfect example of the increased educational possibilities offered to women of Spain’s middle and upper classes in the early sixteenth century. A true “Renaissance woman,” Cecilia Morillas spoke several languages, played numerous musical instruments and cultivated her talents in various forms of artistic expression. She was not unique among elite urban women of the time. By the late fifteenth century, there was an increase of prominent humanists in both church and state government, including the archbishop of Toledo and even Queen

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Isabella herself. These leaders promoted modest yet progressive ideas regarding female education. By the 1550s, however, the shift in church politics led its leaders to the conclusion that the female spirit was too weak to resist the complicated temptations of the day. Thus, in a move that ostensibly sought to protect both Spain’s integrity and women’s souls, both church and state restricted women’s access to education.

The socio-historic changes that took place during the mid-sixteenth century provoked a boom in literature and conduct manuals that contemplated and prescribed codes of behavior proper to virtuous women. In contrast to popular early sixteenth-century texts on education that demonstrate a modicum of education and autonomy as beneficial to a woman’s development—in works such as Juan Luis Vives’s *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1524) and Erasmus’s *Exhortation to Diligent Study of Scripture* (1516) and *The Institution of Christian Marriage* (1526)—influential texts in the latter part of the sixteenth century stressed the need to keep women innocent and free from self-indulgence. Works such as Fray Luis de León’s *The Perfect Wife* (1583) and Juan de Huarte’s *Examination of Men’s Wits* (1575) signaled a change in attitude toward women’s education in Spain that did not begin to come widely into question again until the nineteenth century.10


It is important to note that none of the titles mentioned here recommend complete autonomy or promote unfettered female agency when it comes to education. Vives’s work, which defends a woman’s right to increased education and contemplation of religious matters, can easily be criticized for being misogynistic and limited by readers today, though this interpretation holds Vives to impossible standards for his time. Fray Luis de León’s work must be viewed more broadly as well. While *The Perfect Wife* undoubtedly configures
The greatest danger foreseen in women's education was its potential to destabilize the church's rigid male-dominated hierarchies and control of interpretive power. Many church leaders and intellectuals mobilized both religious and scientific knowledge to prove that women's constitutions were weaker than men's, and, therefore, more prone to error and deception. While biological and medical texts from the time point to such "facts" as female body temperature, body shape, and levels of hydration to prove that women were not meant to engage in intellectual pursuits, others, like Fray Luis de León, found inspiration in the famous opinion presented by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35: "Women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." 11 In The Perfect Wife, a best-selling marital guide published in five yearly editions throughout the 1580s, Fray Luis wrote:

Nature, indeed, as we have said already, and intend to say again, constituted women to stay in closely, and to be the guardians of their homes. So likewise has it laid upon them the obligation to keep their lips closed...."(155) 12

The exclusively male church hierarchy in sixteenth-century Spain expected the same from its family's women. In order to be perfect "brides of Christ," nuns must remain in their cells and refrain from speaking or expressing themselves.

"Perfected" female behavior was not always a reality, however, especially during the decades following the Discalced Carmelite reforms. Though outwardly the Discalced sisters preached obedience

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