

MARÍA VELA Y CUETO

# Autobiography and Letters of a Spanish Nun



*Edited by*

SUSAN DIANE LANINGHAM

*Translated by*

JANE TAR

Iter Press  
Toronto, Ontario

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies  
Tempe, Arizona

2016

Iter Press

Tel: 416/978-7074 Email: [iter@utoronto.ca](mailto:iter@utoronto.ca)

Fax: 416/978-1668 Web: [www.itergateway.org](http://www.itergateway.org)

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Tel: 480/965-5900 Email: [mrts@acmrs.org](mailto:mrts@acmrs.org)

Fax: 480/965-1681 Web: [acmrs.org](http://acmrs.org)

© 2016 Iter, Inc. and the Arizona Board of Regents for Arizona State University.

All rights reserved.

Printed in Canada.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Vela, María, author. | Laningham, Susan, editor.

Title: María Vela y Cueto : autobiography and letters of a Spanish nun / edited by Susan Laningham; translated by Jane Tar.

Description: Tempe : Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016. | Series: The other voice in early modern Europe. The Toronto series ; 51 | Series: Medieval and Renaissance texts and studies ; VOLUME 504

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027566 (print) | LCCN 2016039001 (ebook) | ISBN 9780866985598 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780866987271 ()

Subjects: LCSH: Vela, María. | Nuns—Spain—Biography. | Spiritual life—Catholic Church. | Cistercians—Spain—Ávila—History.

Classification: LCC BX4705.V427 A25 2016 (print) | LCC BX4705.V427 (ebook) | DDC 271/.97 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016027566>

Cover illustration:

María Vela y Cueto. Frontispiece of Miguel González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte... la vida de Doña María Vela... de Ávila* (Madrid: Viuda de Alonso Martín de Balboa, 1618). Courtesy, Biblioteca Nacional de España.

Cover design:

Maureen Morin, Information Technology Services, University of Toronto Libraries.

Typesetting and production:

Iter Press.

## Introduction

---

---

### *The Other Voice*

When the Spanish nun and mystic María Vela y Cueto died in 1617, her handwritten autobiography literally went with her to the grave. Vela's confessor placed it in her coffin on the day of her burial in the convent of Santa Ana in Ávila, thus ensuring that the manuscript would be safe from the crowds and relic seekers who gathered to pay their respects to a woman already famous for her piety and patient suffering.<sup>1</sup> Six years later, intent upon making a case for Vela's canonization, the bishop of Ávila had her body exhumed, examined for evidence of sanctity, and placed in a new tomb in the wall between the convent chapel and choir.<sup>2</sup> The autobiography stayed for a time in a small box in the sepulchral niche, but was eventually transferred to the more salubrious environment of the convent archive, where it has remained for nearly four hundred years. Vela's once-buried voice—the manuscript known as a *Vida* (life; autobiography)—appears translated in its entirety in this volume, along with a selection of her personal letters.

Ten years before her death, a forty-six-year-old Vela picked up her pen and began writing her *Vida*, the autobiographical and chronological account of her quest for spiritual perfection in the aristocratic Cistercian convent of Santa Ana in Ávila, Spain. Writing in obedience to her confessor's command (the same confessor who later placed the manuscript in her coffin), Vela took full advantage of the proffered opportunity to reveal her extraordinary relationship with God and the divine locutions and visions that inspired and directed her every move.<sup>3</sup>

1. The demand for relics prompted the nuns of Santa Ana to cut Vela's hair and remove and apportion her veil, scapular, and dress—the very clothing in which she should have been buried. Having denuded the body of its burial attire, the nuns had to dress it in a donated habit. The earliest documentation of Vela's death and burial comes from the biography written by her last confessor, Miguel González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte: Por otro título, la vida de Doña María Vela, monja de San Bernardo en el convento de Santa Ana de Ávila* (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1674; 1st ed. 1618), 196–97.

2. Scholars from the university in Salamanca provided signed testimony that Vela's body showed no sign of corruption, a condition considered characteristic of a saint. The translation of the body into a new sepulcher was ordered by Bishop Francisco de Gamarra and notarized in August of 1623. Monasterio de Santa Ana (hereafter MSA), Legajo de María Vela 3/1, pieza 3, número 5–6.

3. Many medieval and early modern nuns who insisted that they wrote only in obedience to a confessor were employing a rhetorical strategy that preserved their roles as submissive daughters of the church. Attributing to their confessors their incentive to write allowed holy women such as Saint Teresa of Ávila, Ana de San Bartolomé, and Isabel de Jesús to demonstrate their deference to the male hierarchy and the meekness appropriate to women, even as they ventured into the theological debates and self-explanations generally reserved for men. The strategies used by writing nuns in early modern Spain are discussed in Bárbara Mujica, *Women Writers of Early Modern Spain: Sophia's*

## 2 Introduction

On the pages of her *Vida*, Vela demonstrated her knowledge of scripture, church doctrine, the monastic environment, hagiography, and human nature as she described the reactions of her peers and supervisors to her efforts to live a holy and ascetic life. Although certainly not without its risks in an era when claims of celestial favors from God could be construed as spiritual arrogance or heresy, the compilation of a formal *Vida* allowed her to refashion herself, in narrative form, into a replica of great female saints and mystics like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Ávila, to whom she pointedly referred as she recalled her own sufferings and achievements.<sup>4</sup>

Vela's desire to be recognized as a woman singled out by God for sainthood informed the crafting of her *Vida* and the life she described on its pages.<sup>5</sup> From a voice so focused on the personal attainment of spiritual perfection, it might seem

---

*Daughters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Alison P. Weber, *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Ávila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Sherry M. Velasco, *Demons, Nausea, and Resistance in the Autobiography of Isabel de Jesús, 1611–1682* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

4. Rome canonized Catherine of Siena (ca. 1340–80) in 1461. For a discussion of Catherine of Siena's influence on Spanish holy women, see Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, "Ecstasy, Prophecy, and Reform: Catherine of Siena as a Model for Holy Women of Sixteenth-Century Spain," *The Mystical Gesture: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Spiritual Culture in Honor of Mary E. Giles*, ed. Robert Boenig (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 53–65. For Catherine's influence on European history, see F. Thomas Luongo, *The Sainthood Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); for Catherine's literary legacy, Jane C. Tyler, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). A modern English edition of Catherine's most famous written work is provided in Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* trans. Suzanne Noffke, Classics of Western Spirituality, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980). For the pious biography composed by her confessor and spiritual advisor, see Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. George Lamb (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 2003). Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), as her name suggests, shared with María Vela a hometown. She was beatified in 1614, three years before Vela's death, and canonized in 1622. A prolific writer, her literary corpus, including her spiritual autobiography (*Vida*), is available in English translation in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. and ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976–85); for Teresa's works in Spanish, see *Santa Teresa de Jesús: Obras Completas*, trans. and ed. Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink (Madrid: BAC, 1986). Monographs on Teresa and her social and political context include Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Ahlgren, *Teresa of Ávila and the Politics of Sanctity*; Weber, *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*.

5. The original manuscript of Vela's *Vida* is conserved in the archives of the convent of Santa Ana in Ávila, as is Vela's *Mercedes* (Mercies), a summary of her mystical experiences, which she recorded a decade prior to the compilation of her *Vida*. In her *Mercedes*, Vela is forthright about her aspirations to sainthood, but in her *Vida* she more subtly reveals her ambition by comparing her experiences to those of saints. For another case of autobiography used to promote a personal quest for sainthood, see E. Ann Matter, "The Personal and the Paradigm: The Book of María Domitilla Galluzzi," in *The*

that little can be learned about the cares and concerns of “normal” women in late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Spain. Granted, the unusual occurrences in the life of a nun trying very hard to be atypical would not appear to lend insight into the general female condition. But once we divest ourselves of the very notion that Vela hoped to instill in her readers—that God had shaped her into an extraordinary and rare representative of her sex—we find a resourceful woman engaged in a personal struggle to control her own fate by manipulating the environment in which she lived. By arguing that God was on her side, Vela employed one of the few means toward empowerment allowed to her sex in the male-dominated and religiously restrictive society in which early modern women lived.<sup>6</sup>

Occupied as she was by efforts to negotiate her place as a mystic, ascetic, and future saint, Vela still found time to correspond regularly with her older siblings, Diego Álvarez de Cueto and Lorenzo Cueto.<sup>7</sup> The more than eighty letters she wrote to her brothers lack the painful self-consciousness inherent in a *Vida* that she knew would be read by her confessor and his peers. Complaints in her letters about superiors and fellow nuns indicate a confidence that her words would be read only by the brother to whom they were written. To Diego and Lorenzo, she could describe the drama of her days and her ambition to reform both herself and her convent. The letters provide tantalizing glimpses of monastic procedure and politics, and reveal a degree of flexibility in communal living that made a cloistered ascetic life possible. Just as important, the correspondence opens a window into family relationships within Spain’s minor landed aristocracy, for Vela speaks candidly to the brothers on whom she depended for both material and emotional support.<sup>8</sup>

To ensure that persons beyond her intimate circle of family and friends understood the significance of her relationship with God, Vela used the vehicle

---

*Cranried Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 87–103.

6. Women who successfully convinced spiritual authorities that God had entrusted them with special gifts or missions include the German abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), the Italian tertiary Catherine of Siena (ca. 1340–80), and the Spanish reformer Teresa of Ávila (1515–82). For cases in which national or communal concerns or the vagaries of politics determined the positive or negative reception of a woman’s claims of communication with God, see Cecilia Ferrazzi, *Autobiography of an Aspiring Saint*, ed. and trans. Anne Jacobson Schutte, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Richard Kagan, *Lucrecia’s Dreams: Politics and Prophecy in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

7. MSA, *Cartas de María Vela* (31 fols.). Almost all of Vela’s extant letters were written to her youngest brother, Lorenzo.

8. Vela’s brothers also supported their sister’s quest for sainthood. See Susan Laningham, “Making a Saint out of a Sibling,” *Sibling Relations and Gender in the Early Modern World*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 15–27.

approved and even mandated by her confessor—a *Vida*. She always maintained that she wrote it only at her confessor's command, and she occasionally expressed a desire to burn it, lest it fall into unfriendly hands, but to refuse to write or to destroy the written account of her life would have snuffed out her voice.<sup>9</sup> Writing, despite its risks, gave her the opportunity to speak broadly in a world in which the words of men typically prevailed. Vela understood her environment; she knew how to operate within its constraints. The *Vida* and personal correspondence selected for this volume stand as testimony to her awareness and manipulation of the gendered politics and theological disputes of the world in which she lived. For that, she deserves our attention.

### *Life and Career*

María Vela y Cueto spent the last forty-one years of her life in Ávila, a city located on the high Castilian plain some sixty miles northwest of Madrid. The religious history of Ávila paralleled that of greater Iberia.<sup>10</sup> In the early centuries of the first millennium, before Ávila existed as a political entity, Christians and Jews lived as minorities in the Romanized settlements of the region. The dismemberment of the Western Roman Empire during the fifth century CE allowed the Visigoths, who had been Christianized by the Romans, to establish rule over Spain. Christianity flourished unmolested in Visigoth Spain until 711, when the armed forces of Islam arrived. Muslim Berber armies destroyed Visigoth authority and within a decade pushed Christian military resistance to the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula, leaving most of Spain in the hands of Muslim overlords. Christians in the north regrouped and struck back, in a long military campaign known as the *Reconquista* (Reconquest).<sup>11</sup> For seven centuries, Muslims and Christians battled for territorial and religious control. In the 1080s, King Alfonso VI seized the strategically important high plain of central Spain and put his son-in-law Ramón of Burgundy in charge of repopulating the area with loyal Christians, an enterprise

9. Weber, in *Rhetoric of Femininity*, 45–46, appropriates the term “double bind” to describe the paradox that bedeviled a writing nun. Vela's need, or desire, to tell of God's favor coupled with her need and/or desire to submit to the will of her superiors placed her in a double bind, in which “compliance with the order on one level violates it on another level.” Humility, Weber reminds us, “is tainted by self-regard,” but as Aviad Kleinberg observes, “total humility—a complete refusal to co-operate with potential admirers—would result in anonymity.” Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 111–12.

10. For a history of Ávila written and published during Vela's lifetime, see Luis Ariz, *Historia de las grandezas de la ciudad de Ávila* (Alcalá de Henares: Luys Martínez Grande, 1607).

11. For the general military and political history of medieval Spain, see Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), and Bernard F. Reilly, *The Medieval Spains* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

that included the establishment of the town of Ávila. Ávila's precarious location on an ever-changing frontier prompted the erection of nearly two miles of forty-foot-high walls punctuated with over eighty watchtowers, built with the labor of Muslim prisoners of war. The fortified city remained in Christian hands and prospered as the war against Islam moved to the south.

Centrally located in the kingdom of Castile-León, Ávila played a notable part in the political controversies of the late Middle Ages. In the early 1470s, its citizens declared for the young princess Isabel, even burning an effigy of her rival and half-brother, the reigning king, Enrique IV. Having displayed such overt hostility toward Enrique, things might have gone badly for the people of Ávila, indeed, had Isabel not secured the throne in 1474. Twenty years later, during Isabel's reign, the city served as the site of the infamous trial, conviction, and execution of several Jews accused of torturing and cannibalizing a young child in Toledo. The judicial "proof" in Ávila of Jewish intransigency contributed to Isabel and Fernando's decision in 1492, just months after capturing the last Muslim stronghold of Granada, to expel all Jews from Spain, including the nearly three thousand living in Ávila.

By María Vela's birth in 1561, the population of Ávila had expanded well beyond the city's medieval walls. The local aristocracy, which included Vela's family, counted for at least 10 percent of the total, although most Abulenses (residents of Ávila) earned their livings as artisans or manufacturers in an economy based upon the massive flocks of sheep that traversed the Castilian plain. In 1572, Ávila's population reached a peak of some twelve to thirteen thousand.<sup>12</sup> Yet, census and tax records of 1591 show that Ávila's population had already begun what would ultimately be a 50 percent decline in number by 1632.<sup>13</sup> Among the ten thousand or so residents of the city in 1591 were 136 secular clergy, 180 monks and friars, and 335 nuns.<sup>14</sup> Santa Ana, the oldest of Ávila's seven convents, housed fifty professed Cistercian women, among them María Vela. Eighty Carmelites lived in Ávila's largest convent, la Encarnación, while only fourteen nuns resided in

12. Included in that number were 184 secular clergy who served the needs of the faithful in a variety of ways—as cathedral canons, chaplains to convents and hospitals, parish curates, subalterns, even grammar teachers. James F. Melvin, "Fathers as Brothers in Early Modern Catholicism: Priestly Life in Ávila, 1560–1636" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 40. Melvin provides extensive statistics and analysis of Ávila's secular priests in the decades surrounding Vela's life.

13. By 1632, Ávila's population had been reduced by half, as a result of crop failures, plague, the immigration of aristocrats and bureaucrats to the royal court in Madrid, and the expulsion of Moriscos (Christians of Muslim ancestry). See Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa*, for the social and cultural effects of Ávila's changing demographics. For a complete demographic of sixteenth-century Ávila, see Serafin de Tapia, "Las fuentes demográficas y el potencial humano de Ávila en el siglo XVI," *Cuadernos Abulenses* 2 (1984): 31–88.

14. Melvin, "Fathers as Brothers," 42–44.

the Reformed Carmelite convent of San José, the smallest and newest house of religious women, founded in 1562 by Teresa of Ávila.

Ávila was the hometown of Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda (1515–82), more commonly known as Teresa of Ávila or Teresa of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> By the time María Vela entered the convent of Santa Ana in 1576, Teresa's mysticism and reform of the Carmelite Order had made her one of the most consequential women of the sixteenth century, as attested by her swift beatification in 1614 and canonization in 1622. Born and raised in Ávila to a wealthy middle-class family, Teresa made her profession as a Carmelite nun in 1536 at la Encarnación, a patrician convent, much like the one that would later house Vela. In the mid-1550s, Teresa developed a mystical piety that prompted in her a desire for spiritual contemplation and prayer that could not be satisfied in the privileged atmosphere of la Encarnación. Thus, inspired by her conversations with God, she left la Encarnación, with its private rooms, servants, and lively social life, in order to establish a strictly ascetic and observant house of nuns. In 1562, she founded in Ávila her first convent of reformed Carmelites—the Discalced (Shoeless)—thereafter traveling throughout Spain to personally set up fifteen more Discalced convents. Teresa penned various treatises on spiritual perfection, as well as a *Vida* in which she described in dramatic detail her mystical experiences and spiritual progress. She died in 1582, the same year that Vela took the final vows required to become a fully professed nun in the Cistercian convent of Santa Ana.

Vela's attitudes and ambitions were shaped by Teresa's reputation, as demonstrated by her many references to "Holy Mother Teresa," but she also drew inspiration from the books that she read.<sup>16</sup> Vela was fully literate in Spanish, writing it in a firm, clear hand, and seems to have been, if not proficient, at least comfortable enough with Latin to provide Spanish translations in the margins of texts, "for the benefit of those who could not read the cultured Latin," according

15. In 1970, Pope Paul VI declared Teresa the first female "Doctor of the Church." Scholarly biographical treatments of Teresa include Carole Slade, *St. Teresa: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Bilinkoff, *Avila of Saint Teresa*; Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*.

16. In her *Vida*, Vela says that reading Holy Mother Teresa's admonition against complaining inspired her decision to become a "new nun"; she also reports a vision of the bloody wound in Christ's side while meditating on Teresa's writings about the humanity of Christ. Recent investigations into literacy levels and reading habits of early modern Spanish women include Anne J. Cruz and Rosalie Hernández, eds., *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), in particular the essays by Darcy Donahue, "Wondrous Words: Miraculous Literacy and Real Literacy in the Discalced Carmelite Convents of Early Modern Spain," 105–22, and Elizabeth Teresa Howe, "'Let Your Women Keep Silent': The Pauline Dictum and Women's Education," 123–38. See, also, Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008); Pedro M. Cátedra and Anastasio Rojo, *Bibliotecas y lecturas de mujeres (Siglo XVI)* (Salamanca, Spain: Instituto de Historia del Libro y de la Lectura, 2004).

to her confessor and biographer, Miguel González Vaquero.<sup>17</sup> Vaquero noted that Vela and her confessors often read together—books such as *Audi, filia* (Listen, daughter) by Juan de Ávila, a favorite in her early years in the convent, and “a little book about Gregorio López,” which Vaquero brought to the convent for Vela’s perusal just ten months before her death.<sup>18</sup> On her deathbed, Vela told the nuns keeping nightly vigil at her bedside that they should read something, rather than sit idly by, and suggested Luis de la Puente’s tract on the Blessed Sacrament. The aristocratic backgrounds of the nuns of Santa Ana ensured a level of literacy that made possible the reading and studying of such theological works. Coincidentally, early-modern artists often depicted Saint Anne, the patron saint of Vela’s convent, not only with an open book in her hand but using it to teach her daughter, the young Virgin Mary, to read.<sup>19</sup>

Vela’s family counted among the socially elite of Ávila. Kinsmen on her father’s side included a viceroy of Peru, an admiral, a member of King Felipe II’s Council of War, and a bishop of Burgos.<sup>20</sup> Too privileged to engage in trade or the professions, men in the Vela family were diplomats, members of the upper clergy, and large landowners. As befitted their status as minor aristocrats in Spain, Vela and her parents and siblings lived on the income generated from the property surrounding the family home in Cardenosa, five miles north of Ávila. Of her childhood, little is known. Born in 1561 to Don Diego Álvarez de Cueto and his wife Doña Ana de Aguirre, Vela was nine years old and the third oldest of five children under the age of twelve when her father died at the age of thirty-four. In spite of the emotional and financial burden of raising five minors, Vela’s devout mother found widowhood to be a spiritual advantage, for whereas during her married life Doña Ana’s prayers merited only a vision of Christ’s shoulders, her widowed and celibate state rendered her worthy enough to view Christ’s entire face.<sup>21</sup>

A mother given to mystical devotions and convinced of the benefits of celibacy surely influenced the tenor of her children’s lives, but Vaquero admits that the fourteen-year-old Vela “nearly succumbed to the devil’s temptation to stay in the world, like her mother,” rather than embrace a monastic life. Cognizant

17. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 120v. Vaquero published *La muger fuerte* in 1618, one year after Vela’s death. At least three more Spanish editions and two Italian ones were printed in the seventeenth century.

18. *Ibid.*, 120r.

19. Artistic portrayals of Saint Anne holding a book contained mixed messages that reflected ongoing theological debates about the value of literacy for women and about gender roles in general. See Emilie L. Bergmann, “Learning at Her Mother’s Knee?: Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary, and the Iconography of Women’s Literacy,” in Cruz and Hernández, *Women’s Literacy*, 243–61.

20. Vela says nothing about her life before her arrival in Santa Ana; information comes from González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*.

21. *Ibid.*, 3.

of her daughter's indecision, Doña Ana prayed for a sign from God, whereupon the teenage Vela became gravely ill, a circumstance quickly interpreted as an indication of Christ's jealous love—Christ clearly wanted María for himself; María must enter the convent.<sup>22</sup> Thus, encouraged by a divine warning and/or by the insistence of her mother, María Vela chose the convent.

Vela began her monastic life in Santa Ana, the oldest and most exclusive of the seven convents in Ávila.<sup>23</sup> Established in the 1320s, Santa Ana was from its inception associated with the elite of Spain, for its founder, Don Sancho Dávila, the bishop of Ávila from 1313 to 1355, had charge of the upbringing of the child king Alfonso XI (r. 1312–50). Dávila incorporated into Santa Ana both the nuns and the endowment of an older convent founded by Alfonso the Wise (r. 1252–84). The endowment appropriated by Dávila for the new convent consisted of a yearly tribute of three bushels of wheat produced from the labor of each yoke of oxen worked in the region, a boon confirmed by successive monarchs of Spain.<sup>24</sup> Thus, from its beginning the convent of Santa Ana enjoyed a generous perpetual income and royal privileges.<sup>25</sup> It maintained its affiliation with the Spanish monarchy over the years, most notably in the late fifteenth century, when the future queen Isabel I of Castile used it as a refuge during the civil wars that led to her ascension to the throne in 1474.<sup>26</sup> Monarchs of Spain continued to honor Santa Ana with their royal presence: in 1531, the ceremony presenting the first pair of adult breeches

22. *Ibid.*, 4r.

23. For information on Santa Ana and its foundation, see Ferreol Hernández Hernández, "El Convento Cisterciense de Santa Ana en Ávila," *Cistercium* 11 (1959): 136–43. See Francisco Esteban Martín, *Venerable María Vela (Religiosa Cisterciense), 1561–1617* (Ávila: Signum Christi, 1986), 34–35; Bartolomé Fernández Valencia, *Historia y Grandezas del Insigne Templo ... de los Santos Mártires, Ávila, 1676* (Ávila: Ediciones de la Institución "Gran Duque de Alba" de la Excm., 1992), 73–75. For the architecture of Santa Ana, see Maruqui Ruiz-Ayucar, "El Claustro del Convento de Santa Ana," *Cuadernos Abulenses* 1 (1984): 143–45. For the particulars of the Cistercian observance (rule) given to the nuns of Santa Ana in the late fifteenth century by the bishop of Ávila, see Olegario González Hernández, "Fray Hernando de Talavera: Un aspecto nuevo de su personalidad," *Hispania Sacra* 13 (1960): 149–74.

24. Gonzáles Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 4v; Hernández Hernández, "El Convento Cisterciense de Santa Ana en Ávila," 142.

25. Convents received perpetual incomes from properties bequeathed to them by their patrons and donors. The financial mechanics of convents in early modern Valladolid are discussed in Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 47–104.

26. Scholarly treatments of Isabel I of Castile include Peggy K. Liss, *Isabel the Queen: Life and Times*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Barbara Weissberger, ed., *Queen Isabel of Castile: Power, Patronage, Persona* (Woodbridge, UK: Tamesis Books, 2008). Isabel seems to have maintained a strong affection for Ávila. She and Fernando buried their only son (d. 1497) in the church of the Dominican monastery of Santo Tomás, in Ávila, from whence came many of the confessors to the nuns of Santa Ana.

to the child later to become Felipe II took place in Santa Ana, and King Felipe III visited in 1600, three years before Vela began writing her *Vida*.<sup>27</sup>

With its illustrious heritage, Santa Ana catered not only to royal tastes, but also to the needs and desires of elites like the Vela and Cueto family. In Ávila and elsewhere in Spain, the interests of patrician families intersected with those of the church: both upheld the uncompromising notion of social order and hierarchy; each confirmed the authority invested in the other. Spanish aristocrats who became friars, monks, or nuns typically maintained their cognizance and expectation of social privilege—as indicated by the prefix *doña* used by nuns in Santa Ana—and families extended their patronage networks into the monasteries or convents where their sons and daughters resided. Family members who took monastic vows often joined the same religious Order or even entered the same religious house; in Santa Ana, Vela and her younger sisters joined their paternal aunt, Isabel de Cueto.

The Vela men similarly combined devotion to the church with duty to the family. Soon after the Vela sisters entered Santa Ana, their brother, Lorenzo, second son of the family, began his tutelage in the household of their uncle, Cristóbal Vela, the bishop of Burgos, one of Spain's premier prelates. Like his sisters, Lorenzo Cueto took monastic vows that joined him to the Cistercians. He also became a priest, which allowed him to act as Vela's confessor during the difficult years in Santa Ana when no other cleric dared risk his career for her sake. Both of Vela's brothers championed her cause. Diego Álvarez de Cueto, as the oldest male and only sibling outside the religious life, oversaw the family's finances and thus regularly sent money to his sister—alms to cover her daily expenses in addition to the installments of the dowry and provisions required by convents.<sup>28</sup> Until his death in 1608, Diego concerned himself with his sister's well-being and reputation, personally going to the bishop of Ávila on her behalf and declaring her sanctity in public.<sup>29</sup>

Vela belatedly took her vows in 1582, after an unusually long novitiate of over five years, extended perhaps by her precarious health. She suffered from a variety of life-threatening ailments—pleurisy, epilepsy, and intermittent fevers—and was often too weak to walk without the support of others. When she came to

27. Hernández Hernández, "El Convento Cisterciense de Santa Ana en Ávila," 141.

28. Vaquero mentions as evidence of Vela's piety that she never had money in her hands, knew the value of only two or three different coins, and preferred that the alms sent to her by her brother Diego be given into the care of the abbess. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 48r. Although nuns relinquished all claims to family inheritance when they made their final vows, a new novice's family did enter into a financial contract with the convent. The contract stipulated the amount of the dowry and funding for provisions that would be paid either in full or, more typically, in yearly installments for the life of the nun. For specifics of the contract between a novice's family and the convent, see Lehfeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain*, 83–86.

29. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 104v.

the convent in 1576, she had to be carried in a chair, which prompted the nuns who observed her arrival to comment that the young woman had come to them only in time to die.<sup>30</sup> Vela lived, but her mother's death in 1581 was followed by that of her youngest sister Isabel in 1583 and her sister Jerónima in 1585, and, with the passing of her aunt in the mid-1590s, Vela found herself without any principal female kin. Ironically, it had been her health that concerned family and friends, yet she continued to survive.

Vela's physical survival may have surprised a number of her peers, but not nearly as much as her claims, in 1598, of personal communication with God. She insisted that God had promised her a crown of sainthood, if she would forgo meals on days she received the Eucharist. Fasting on communion days was not an impossible or life-threatening act of devotion, unless one insisted upon taking communion every day. According to Vela, God wished her to do just that—communicate daily and take the wafer, the flesh of Christ, as her only food. As proof of God's desire, whenever Vela knelt at the communion window on days she was forced to eat meals, her jaws locked.

For the next five years, from 1598 to 1603, a succession of abbesses, confessors, local priests, and famous theologians attempted to determine the veracity of Vela's claims through a series of "tests" that included commands that Vela fast, or not fast; take communion, or forgo communion. The tests succeeded only in increasing speculation, rumor, resentment, and fear. Each new abbess took a different approach, some accusing Vela of obstinacy and disobedience, others helping to facilitate her efforts to obey the directives she received from God.<sup>31</sup> A number of confessors tried to resolve the situation—Francisco Salcedo from 1596 to 1598, Julián de Ávila for two months in 1599, and Gerónimo de San Eliseo from 1600 to 1603. All resigned their appointments, finding themselves ill equipped or disinclined to handle the controversy and criticisms they encountered. Prominent theologians and monastic officials from across Spain offered their opinions; their proffered remedies ranged from exorcism to sugared melon. Vela's emotional and physical health deteriorated as she struggled to obey both earthly supervisors and God—a difficult task, since divine and human instruction often contradicted. Throughout, accusations of demonic possession, fraud, heresy, and insanity competed with assertions of Vela's godliness.

30. *Ibid.*, 4.

31. An abbess whom Vaquero does not identify vouched for the accuracy of Vela's written account of these tumultuous years. *Ibid.*, 114r. Vela and Vaquero occasionally provide names of abbesses and dates of election, but otherwise identification is difficult, due to the absence in the Santa Ana archives of an official record of office holders prior to 1714. Normally, the convent elected a new abbess every three or four years, but resignations and ill health could result in more than the usual number for any given time. Vaquero says that the abbess elected on March 8, 1598, was the first of four (unnamed) who served within three years. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 71v.

The turning point came in the spring of 1603, when several nuns reported Vela to the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The inquisitor appointed Father Juan de Alarcón, prior of the Dominican monastery of Santa Tomás, to investigate. After speaking with Vela, Alarcón, who up to that point had been an outspoken critic of what he called her “excesses,” admitted that he had based his previous negative opinion of her on rumors. He declared her to be blameless, but the encounter left Vela severely depressed. Miserable and filled with self-loathing, she remained inconsolable and “fit only for hell,” as she put it, when a chance encounter brought Dr. Miguel González Vaquero into her life. Years later, Vela recorded in her *Vida* that during their first conversation, “I felt such great satisfaction and gladness of heart that I scarcely knew myself.” Vaquero took charge of the beleaguered nun, becoming her confessor and spiritual director. To her critics, he presented her as a woman whose desire to draw close to God had inspired savage attacks by a jealous devil. He convinced the nuns of Santa Ana that Vela’s devotion and sufferings were genuine, and that she was, above all else, properly obedient. His skillful handling of the controversial nun soothed concerns, and soon the nuns of Santa Ana collectively came to terms with Vela’s extraordinary piety.<sup>32</sup> The supervision of a strong confessor, the exoneration by the Inquisition, the assistance provided by her brothers, her popularity among the younger nuns, and her own persistence earned for her the respect of her peers and supervisors.

Vela spent forty-one years cloistered in Santa Ana, where, in spite of frequent illness and debilitating pain, she performed the duties and exhibited the virtues generally expected of nuns. As organist for the choir, Vela contributed in an essential way to the convent’s status, for it was music that often drew visitors and potential donors.<sup>33</sup> She also directly abetted the day-to-day operation of Santa

32. On the significance of confessors in the lives of controversial holy women, see Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); John W. Coakley, *Women, Men, and Spiritual Power: Female Saints and Their Male Collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). For Vaquero’s management of Vela, see Susan Laningham, “Maladies up Her Sleeve?: Clerical Interpretation of a Suffering Female Body in Counter-Reformation Spain,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (University of Maryland Center for Renaissance and Baroque Studies) 1 (2006): 69–97; Jodi Bilinkoff, “Confessors, Penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Ávila,” in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800): Essays in Honor of Natalie Zemon Davis*, ed. Barbara D. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 83–100; Darcy Donahue, “Writing Lives: Nuns and Confessors as Auto/biographers in Early Modern Spain,” *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 13 (1989): 230–39.

33. For nuns and their music in early modern Spain, see Colleen Baade, “Music and Misgiving: Attitudes towards Nuns’ Music in Early Modern Spain,” in *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 81–95; Baade, “Music and Music-Making in Female Monasteries in Seventeenth-Century Castile” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2001). Studies of music in early modern Italian convents include Craig A. Monson, *Divas in the Convent: Nuns, Music, and Defiance in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012); Colleen Reardon, *Holy Concord within Sacred Walls: Nuns and Music in Siena, 1575–1700* (New

Ana by holding appointed and elected offices. As sacristan she was responsible for the maintenance and handling of the holy vestments and vessels used by priests who performed the mass for the nuns. At age thirty-nine, she became mistress of novices, a position usually held by much older nuns, since the office entailed the care, instruction, and proper influencing of the young women who would soon take their final vows. In many ways, Vela's career as a nun reflected the vitality of the Counter-Reformation. Even the rumor, actually true, that she wanted to start a new, reformed convent was met with approval and enthusiasm by a number of Santa Ana's nuns, who viewed her as a vehicle through which they might all participate in the early modern trend of monastic renewal.<sup>34</sup>

For the last fourteen years of her life, Vela communed with God and worked on her *Vida* in the tranquility of a supportive convent. Her reputation as a holy woman grew; reports circulated that she performed miracles. When she died in 1617, she did so with the patience, fortitude, and insight expected of a future saint. To Vaquero, who stayed at her bedside during her final seven days, she revealed certain proofs of a posthumous reward—a vision of herself with a rich crown of gold and jewels, and a divine revelation that the devil, “who had made threats about the hour of her death,” was in a rage, having been defeated.<sup>35</sup>

Vela's death on September 24, 1617, elicited the sort of response often generated by the passing of saintly persons. The people of Ávila gathered en masse at the doors of Santa Ana, begging for a glimpse or even a relic from her body. In order to comply with the wishes of the increasing crowds, the nuns acted swiftly, stripping Vela of her habit and veil and cutting her hair in order to produce the much-desired relics of their now-revered holy woman.<sup>36</sup> The nuns were not alone in facilitating the acclaim of their most popular sister. The process to have Vela beatified—the first step toward canonization—began immediately, with the bishop

---

York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Robert L. Kendrick, *Celestial Sirens: Nuns and Their Music in Early Modern Milan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For a modern recorded adaptation of compositions written by early modern nuns and/or performed in the convents, see Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana, comp., *Songs of Ecstasy and Devotion from a Seventeenth-Century Convent*, audio CD, Linn Records, 1999.

34. See González Hernández's introduction to Vela, *Autobiografía*, 7, ft. 8. In Vela's letter to her brother Lorenzo about the enthusiasm in Santa Ana for a reformed convent, the implication throughout is that *she* generated the desire for reform.

35. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 194r–196. The death expected of a candidate for sainthood is discussed in Carlos Eire's analysis of Saint Teresa of Ávila's last hours. Carlos M. N. Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 370–424.

36. González Vaquero, *La muger fuerte*, 196–97, describes the reaction of the people of Ávila; the handling of the body by the nuns of Santa Ana; and the funeral. See Eire, *Madrid to Purgatory*, 425–68, for treatment of a saint's body after death.