

Autobiographical Writing by Early Modern Hispanic Women.

Elizabeth Teresa Howe.

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Rather than autobiographies in the modern sense, in this book Elizabeth Teresa Howe examines *vidas*, legal documents, letters, and memoirs that contain autobiographical information, much of which is interspersed with other material. In so doing, she provides new ways of thinking about autobiographical writing. Howe argues that although men often co-opted women's life writing for their own purposes, such writing enabled women to achieve agency by articulating the invisible underlying reality of their lives. Howe

stresses that all autobiography is elusive, as the autobiographer necessarily transforms herself into a character and adds or omits details to give coherence to her narration. Autobiography demands self-fashioning, which sometimes makes it indistinguishable from fiction. All of the autobiographers that Howe examines write with intention, either to defend themselves or to curry favor. They mold their stories to fit their objectives. The challenge for the scholar is to distinguish between who the writer says she is and who she reveals herself to be.

Howe begins with the *Memorias* of Leonor López de Córdoba, considered the first Spanish autobiography. Leonor was the daughter of an influential advisor to King Pedro I of Castile, whose family suffered imprisonment and destitution after Pedro's assassination. The work is formulated as a notarial document in which the author offers genealogical and autobiographical information in order to defend her family name and possibly to recover her family's lost property. Although the work has often been dismissed as mendacious, Howe sees it as an early example of female empowerment through writing.

Teresa de Cartagena (b. 1425), author of *Arboleda de los enfermos* (Grove of the infirm) and *Admiración operum Dey* (Wonder at the works of God), used autobiographical writing to express her sense of isolation as both a deaf woman and the descendant of conversos at a time when physical disability was equated with sinfulness and Spain was obsessed with blood purity. Teresa draws on her experience to explore infirmity and pain. Disadvantage becomes an advantage by fostering stillness and humility, which bring Teresa closer to God and give purpose to her life. Howe sees Leonor and Teresa as pioneers who usurp a predominantly male form of literary discourse for their own ends.

Although Teresa de Avila's *Vida* was written at the behest of spiritual directors who revised it repeatedly, Howe argues that the book is authentically Teresa's. The saint took responsibility for her writing, claiming her inspiration came primarily from God, not men, and directing the work to a wide range of readers. Rather than a straightforward narration of her life, *Vida* is a compendium of genres — sometimes a life story, sometimes a spiritual guidebook. Deceptively unpretentious, the text actually consists of a complex and dynamic interplay of registers that subverts the traditional male-female hierarchy. Although Teresa's disciples, María de San José, Ana de San Agustín, and Ana de San Bartolomé, did not all write *Vidas* in the Teresian tradition, they did produce autobiographical writing that both advanced their agendas and challenged the status quo.

La monja alférez (The lieutenant nun) is the life story of Catalina de Erauso, and it reads more like fiction than autobiography. Indeed, doubt exists regarding the authenticity and authorship of this tale of a woman who leaves the convent to become a soldier in the New World. In Howe's opinion, the work is an important narrative of female agency that reveals attitudes toward race, sex, and transvestitism in early modern Spain. Similar to the *relaciones de servicio* written by soldiers seeking compensation from the Crown, the book features a series of violent encounters rather than reflection or piety.

The Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz excelled in virtually every field of scholarly endeavor, inhabiting a traditionally male preserve while ostensibly adhering to the constraints of the cloister. Although autobiographical threads run throughout Juana's writing, Howe focuses on her letters to spiritual directors who censure her for her learning — documents that thinly veil the author's anger and sense of betrayal. The letters are significant not only for their autobiographical material, but for their depiction of the author's psychological state. They constitute a defense of women's right to learn and a challenge to the "holy ignorance" imposed on nuns.

Howe's solid, meticulously researched study enriches our understanding of not only early modern women's letters, but also of the autobiographical genre.

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