The Convent As Catalyst for Autonomy:

Two Hispanic Nuns of the Seventeenth Century

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What can be drawn from contrasting the lives and writings of two Hispanic nuns of the seventeenth century: one, among the greatest intellects and literary talents of the Baroque period, the other an unknown illiterate visionary?

Five years ago such a juxtaposition would not have occured to me. I would not have thought of lining up the two lives and works. The substance of this paper, down to the title itself, represents the impact of feminism on my scholarship; the impact on me of the questions asked of those of us participating in this conference; the effect of both on my own work in progress.

Last June I went to Spain on a CUNY Faculty Grant to examine some manuscript and rare edition autobiographies of Spanish women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For many centuries most of the women who had a room of their own found it in the cloister. As Emily James Putnam stated in her brilliant study, The Lady: Studies of Certain Significant Phases of Her History, [1] "No institution in Europe has ever won for the lady the freedom of development that she enjoyed in the convent...". And, "The impulse toward leadership which kept the men in the world sent the women out of it." Would I find this true of the Spanish nuns of the Renaissance? I wanted to understand the social configurations which made some of the most vital women of the period turn to the cloister, and to reevaluate the literary merit of their writings.

Up to this point scholars have regarded Saint Theresa of Avila as an isolated example of a woman of great energy and spirit, epitome of the

fusion in Spanish life and letters of the real and the ideal. The existence of a number of neglected manuscripts seemed to point to the fact that she was not alone. Around her, and in her wake, came other dynamic and illustrious women. The five autobiographies listed in the Simon Díaz and Morel Fatio bibliographies would, I hoped, without diminishing the importance of Saint Theresa, help to place her in a more accurate context.

What I found in the weirdly systematized, idiosynchratic card catalogs of the Biblioteca Nacional and the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid--and in old bookstores in Madrid and Toledo--were many more such documents. Chaff for those looking for traditional literary value, but a treasure-trove for those seeking new assessments; for historians, psychologists and writers.

The idea for the study grew in part out of a course I gave in the fall of 1972 at Richmond College, called "Women Writers of Spain and Spanish America (it was, to my knowledge, the first of its kind to be given). Marcia Welles, with whom I worked in developing the bibliography and syllabus, gave it here at Barnard the following spring. Randolph Pope, who while teaching at Barnard was completing a Columbia dissertation on Spanish autobiography from 1400 to 1700,[3] directed me to some initial sources and encouraged me to pursue my project on autobiographies. He agreed with me in disputing the commonly held opinion that Spain lacks a literature of personal revelation.

My grant would enable me to eventually extend the curriculum of the course, and to do some basic groundwork that would make the whole area of inquiry more accessible to other scholars. For although there is a respectable body of work surrounding Spanish religious writers of the Renaissance--the noted studies by Menéndez y Pelayo, E. A. Peers, and H. Hatzfeld, to name just three[4]--and a wealth of material on Saint Theresa, there has been

no substantial work covering the area of my study, and certainly no presentation and appraisal of the writings from a feminist viewpoint.

There is much to do. I am planning a bibliographical article documenting the existence and merit of the material I found and brought back with me. Much of the writing is proving of sufficient historical and literary value for me to think of undertaking a book-length offering of selections with a critical introduction. I project doing some translation. In progress is the initial research for an article on the childhood of several of these Spanish nuns for the History of Childhood Quarterly.[5]

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Only one of the nuns highlighted here is directly related to my grant. Isabel de Jesús was born four years after the death of Saint Theresa, not far from the Saint's home town of Avila. While looking under Anas, Marías and Isabels in the catalog at the Biblioteca Nacional, my research assistant came across a reference to: Vida de la Venerable Madre Isabel de Jesus, Recoleta Agustina en el Convento de San Juan Bautista de la Villa de Arenas. Dictada por ella misma, y añadido lo que faltó de su dichosa muerte. En tres libros dividida...Con privilegio en Madrid...1675.[6] I had all 470-odd pages xeroxed. And this past summer I read and extensively annotated Isabel's autobiography. For many reasons it is a priceless document. A kind of primitive masterpiece, it reveals, practically uncensored, the fantasy life of a fanatically religious illiterate Spanish peasant woman.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz--so famous she made the pages of Ms. Magazine last year--the great Mexican poet, playwright and intellectual, was born the year Isabel de Jesús died. It would be hard to find a more

extreme contrast to Isabel. She was a child prodigy. Her autobiography is contained in a 34-page essay known as "La Respuesta a Sor Filotea" (1690). It is a demonstration of her mental virtuosity, a portrait of the origins and development of her intellectual passion and of the suffering it caused her; a defense of the education and intellectual life of women; a veiled protest against ecclesiastic stupidity and repression. This essay deserves to take its place in the canon of basic feminist writings, alongside the works of Wallstonecraft, Woolf, De Beauvoir, Mitchell and Firestone.

Together, the lives of Sor Juana and Isabel span virtually the entire seventeenth century. Isabel de Jesús (1586-1648) lived during the Counter-reformation; the Golden Age of Spanish theater (she mentions seeing a play); the age of Cervantes. When she was in her thirties Saint Theresa was canonized. The age of Spanish hegemony was over, the Spanish Armada having been defeated in 1588. But for all that it touched her, she might well have been living two or three centuries earlier or, like many of Garcia Marquez' characters, through any hundred years of solitude. Hers was an ahistorical world.

Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1694), the last but not least of the Hispanic Baroque writers, was about eight years old when Velásquez painted Las Meninas. She was known as a gongorista, after the Spanish mannerist poet. Quevedo, Gracián and Calderón were her contemporaries. Mary of Agreda, a Spanish nun, published her controversial Mística ciudad de Dios during her lifetime. Juana lived at the hub of Mexican viceroyal society, in the most splendid and complex of the Spanish colonial viceroyalties, that of New Spain (as Mexico was called). Five viceroyal regimes succeeded each other while she was alive. ~~She died on the eve of the enlightenment;~~ In terms

of her formation, she belongs to medieval scholasticism and Renaissance humanism; in terms of her poetic and dramatic output, to the Baroque or mannerist period; of her intellectual orientation, to the dawning of the Age of Reason. Her world was historical and literary to the hilt.

So, we have two women of the same century whose lives were almost exact opposites of each other. Sor Juana represents the most developed intellect of her age; Isabel, totally unlettered, lived in a self-created world of revelation and imagination. Sor Juana was close to the most privileged ranks of society; Isabel, a shepherdess, worked as a domestic servant both in and out of the convent.

Feminism, which has led to a reevaluation of the premises on which judgments are founded, has also broadened into interdisciplinary areas, allowing for the treatment of such divergent lives as these two. But the methodology for such a comparison is not yet set. Since this paper attempts to view these autobiographies as literary, historical, and psychological documents--all three--it has been difficult to arrive at a structure which provides a clear enough focus for such a simultaneity of purposes. I have arbitrarily decided to begin with Sor Juana and then to return to Isabel, attempting in each case to deal with all the issues as a whole.

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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in many senses deserves, much more than Saint Theresa, the place Simone de Beauvoir accorded the latter in The Second Sex[7]: "A woman could never have become Kafka: in her doubts and her anxieties she would never have recognized the anguish of Man driven

from paradise. There is hardly any woman other than St. Theresa who in total abandonment has herself lived out the situation of humanity." In the same chapter, de Beauvoir goes on to say:

> When at last it will be possible for every human being born thus to set his pride beyond the sexual differentiation, in the laborious glory of free existence, then only will woman be able to identify her personal history, her problems, her doubt, her hopes, with those of humanity; then only will she be able to seek in her life and her works to reveal the whole of reality and not merely her personal self. As long as she still has to struggle to become a human being, she cannot become a creator.

For many reasons which I will attempt to reconstruct, Sor Juana was able to transcend the demands of gender and the limitations of what are to this day called in Mexico "the tasks proper to her sex." Because she was so extraordinarily gifted from such an early age, her life did not take the course usual for a woman of her class. It was her own idea in 1655, at the age of seven, to ask her mother to dress her in men's clothes and send her to the university in Mexico City.

> When I was about six or seven, having already learned to read and write, along with the other skills such as embroidery and dressmaking which were considered appropriate for women, I heard that in Mexico City there was a university and schools where one could learn science. As soon as I heard that, I began to torture my mother with insistent and annoying pleas that she change my clothes and send me to live with relatives of hers in Mexico City so I could study at the university.

Instead, she was sent to live with her maternal grandfather, whose library near the provincial town of Amecameca provided her with an unsystematic but thorough education. In her autobiography she laments the lack of teachers and of the stimulation of student peers, and she underlines the sense of loneliness that encumbered her intellectual development. In 1665, at the age of seventeen, she became a lady-in-waiting at the court of the Marquises of Mancera, the new viceroyal couple.

The court treated her as a freak. For example, the viceroys organized an event that recalls old fairy tales, gathering to the palace forty of the most learned men "of the realm" to examine Juana in their respective disciplines. She astonished them all, and gained fame as a miracle on earth. She was paraded, shown off, and expected to produce original poems and plays for all occasions. The abrupt and still unexplained switch from court to convent took place when she was nineteen. Everybody speculates that it was because of disillusionment in love, and in one of her plays there is a reference to something of the sort. Nevertheless, in her autobiography she says:

> Given my complete opposition to the idea of marriage it was the least shocking and most decent thing I could have chosen...

She saw both staying out and entering the convent as choices fraught with difficulties in terms of her main purpose in life, which was "to live alone, to avoid any obligations which might disturb my freedom to study, the tranquil silence of my books." It appears from her autobiography that religious life was in no way a vocation for her, but simply the avenue of least resistance.

The Renaissance woman had entered the Medieval cloister. But hers was no ascetic cell. On the contrary, it came to be more like a salon. She was visited by people at the upper levels of the Church, the viceregal hierarchy, and the university. Gradually, she formed the largest private library in the Spanish American colonies of the time: 4,000 volumes. She also collected musical instruments. She became official poet of the realm, spinning out occasional poetry for loves of the court, for birthdays, anniversaries, and deaths; and sacred poetry and plays for the celebration of religious holidays at the great cathedrals of Mexico.

Sor Juana saw her facility for writing as a double-edged sword. It encroached on time she would have preferred to spend studying, and it provoked envy and resentment on the part of lesser talents. Recent studies have pointed up how hyper-sensitive she was--enraged by the attacks of enemies, upset by the criticism of friends, vain, exhibitionistic, grudge-baring, and sensitive to a fault. How could it have been otherwise, when she had been treated as a bizarre occurrence since her solitary childhood? On the other hand one could say that the genuine appreciation and support she did receive, strengthened her ability to face the vilification and persecution. When her friend the Countess of Paredes published the first volume of her work in Spain in 1689, a scandal ensued. It was considered sinful for a nun to have written so much and so profanely. Excommunication was discussed; her confessor refused her communion for two years. At another time she was prohibited from reading; she treats the episode with light and condescending humor:

> ...a religious but simple-minded mother superior who thought that study was a matter for the Inquisition... ordered me not to study. I obeyed her (for the three months that she lasted in office) as far as not taking a book in hand. But as far as absolutely not studying, it wasn't in my power, I couldn't do it. For even though I wasn't studying in books, I studied in God's works, taking them as letters and the whole Creation as my book.

Her most important source of support, however, was one she herself had marshalled to her side in the course of a lifetime of reading: a long line of "tantas y tan insignes mujeres," the learned and powerful women of the past who were her role models. In her autobiography which is an apologia pro vita sua, she buttresses her self-defense with over 42 examples of her female predecessors--names drawn from classical, mythological, biblical and contemporary sources. I find it amazing that she

consciously went about assembling this list, but such seems to have been the case. The security she derived from this company assured her that, despite the odds, she had a right to move in the world as she did, to follow her bent. Women were not her only models. She compares herself at times with Christ, Saint Peter, Saint Thomas, Saint Jerome, and with prominent male contemporaries.

Now to the Respuesta a Sor Filotea (Reply to Sister Philotea), Sor Juana's autobiographical essay.* Its apparent intent is to excuse and explain her dedication to secular rather than religious letters. That she does magnificently, but she does much more. What appears on the surface to be a most lady-like defense shows that she is a master of irony. In claiming lack of adequate preparation she displays her theological erudition; in insisting on how little she knows she shows how much less those who consider themselves sages know; in apologizing for digressions she creates cadenzas of wit; in being over-courteous she shows her anger. But the Respuesta can also be read as a treatise on interdisciplinary study, a discussion of educational theory, a dissection of a society in which the excellent and the extraordinary were not only not encouraged, but not tolerated.

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* Sor Filotea was a lightly veiled pseudonym for Don Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the Bishop of Puebla, one of Sor Juana's powerful friends. Impressed by the theological reasoning of an essay she had written in refutation of a sermon by a famous Portuguese preacher, Don Manuel had the essay published along with a letter from himself, signing his own letter "Sor Filotea." His letter, ostensibly a reprimand to Juana for not applying her intelligence more to sacred and less to earthly subject matter, was in fact a way of presenting Sor Juana with an opportunity to discourse at length on her favorite subjects. Within three months of receiving it, on March 1, 1691, she had written her autobiographical reply to the letter of "Sor Filotea."

The work is not easy to read. It is full of Latin quotations (in most editions they are translated in footnotes), none of which are, as some critics have claimed, superfluous or irrelevant. It rises and falls in mood and tone: there is tight scholastic logic, classical aphorism, Renaissance harmonic play, and in a few places the familiarity of popular expression. Anger, defiance, challenge, humility, tenderness, and despair alternate as she describes her childhood struggles to educate herself, her love of study above all else; as she defends the right of women to learn and to exercise the freedom to think and reflect and opine. Taking the Respuesta seriously requires an extremely close reading and an effort to understand the connotations and implications of what is, often, said between lines and between words.

Time and again, Sor Juana refers to the inalienable freedom of the mind. In the one poem out of the hundreds she produced which she says she wrote of her own accord ("First Sleep"--Primer sueño, in Spanish, that marvelous union in one word of sleep and dream), casting herself as Phaeton, who dared to steer his carriage toward the sun, she moves through the philosophical knowledge of her day in describing the stages of her own intellectual development, its difficulties, and her final sense of failure. Vicente Gaos, a Mexican philosopher, considers this poem in a class by itself, unequalled in the poetry of intellectual disillusionment. In her autobiography Juana defends her right to refute the theological arguments of a famous Jesuit preacher (see note, p. 10) and to put forth her own. She speaks belligerently:

> It was bold of me to oppose Vieyra? My mind is not as free as his, though it derives from the same Source?

My point in singling out these passages is to confirm in the person of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz the existence of, if not Shakespeare's sister, at least his first cousin.

The ethical, philosophical and literary implications of Sor Juana's autobiography and of her entire legacy--over a thousand pages in the compact edition of her complete works--have yet to be fully explored and understood. Why is a feminist question. Taking the nickname she was given by her contemporaries--la décima musa--later scholars have esconced her on the pedestal of the tenth muse. For all that can be said about progress, the mentality of publishers, editors, critics, students, artists, fathers, brothers and husbands in Spanish-speaking countries has not come a long way. Ludwig Pfandl criticizes her for wanting to enjoy masculine intellectual pleasure; Rivers refers to her in the diminutive as a damita de la corte (a little lady of the court); a monjita (little nun), and calls her "a strange bird"; Castro Leal calls her "a miracle," an "ornament to her century," and claims that her desire for knowledge did not take away from her femininity and charm; Pedro Salinas, affirming how advanced she was for her times, says she would have been better off as a Radcliffe or Mount Holyoke girl, riding a bike in dungarees, hair blowing in the wind.

To women in my field, I'd say go back and reckon with a giant who was always presented to us through the distorted lens of diminution and condescension. To people in other literatures I'd urge Sor Juana's inclusion in 17th century studies. And to all I recommend an encounter with a major poet, playright, essayist, and early feminist.

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So we turn from the philosopher queen to the mystic madwoman. In a strange way, what Simone de Beauvoir said about Saint Theresa can be applied also to Isabel de Jesús. Her ambition and her competitiveness knew no bounds. When Isabel's confessor says to her;

> Isabel, I would be delighted were your spirit to prove as good as that of our Holy Mother Saint Theresa...

she has an immediate inner response:

> ...as my confessor said this to me, voices from within spoke to me thus: your spirit is in no wise inferior to hers, hers belonged to God as does your own...

Her confidence in her direct line to Christ not only made life bearable, it transformed her into a popular sage, a natural theologian. After describing her recognition of the principle of three-in-one and one-in-three (the Trinity), she states:

> Our Lord said to me, Behold this which I have taught you without any effort on your part; this is Mystical Theology, which theologians must struggle to comprehend. Praise God that it was given to me from childhood to know these things, as I have already said.

(Rather than to Mary, a favorite of her mother's, it was to Christ and the Trinity that her affections led her. The psychological implications of this affinity are significant and fascinating, but there is no time here to develop that theme).

The content of Isabel's rich inner life, the variety of visionary, hallucinatory, ecstatic experience is described in detail. In a few instances, she resembles St. John of the Cross, who claimed the suspension of word-power to describe the mystic union. But in most cases she felt no such impediment, and was more than willing to recount the hundreds of visions and miracles that were daily events in her life. I have room for only a few of the more outstanding examples:

I leaned against a marble column...I began to gush tears... to which the pitying Lord responds, for He doesn't have the heart to see us cry...this was the first time I saw Him, because although I burned with His divine love, I had not met Him...And so, appearing in the form of a tiny child, He began to talk to me...If you want to join my school, I will teach you...come here, let's go to Father, and you will tell Him that here in the world you have dealth with a deceptive usurer her confessor who has made promises but who has nothing to give you; I have much to give you, for I come with riches from the Indies of my Father...

There appeared to me in a cloud a great army of devils: the cloud burst suddenly with loud thunder and lightning, and with so many stones it was awesome; the devils in the clouds yelled and screamed, begging the Lord to drown us, for we were sinners...I pleaded with the Lord...to see fit to save the fruits of the spirit. The neighbor women were annoyed that I should ask thus, while I paid no attention to the danger to the vineyards and wheat-fields. The Lord ordered me to pray for souls because they were many who were praying for temporal goods. That cloud did a lot of damage, and it would have done worse if the Lord had not intervened with His Angels. I saw that as they entered it they destroyed it, and it seemed as if there was a battle going on within it, with the good Angels against the bad...

...I saw the Mother of God with her blessed Son in her arms; I saw that she was headless, and that from the decapitated hole her soul was peering out. I was frightened to death; I tried to flee; she began to call me with her head [the head of her spirit?] and to weep; I understood that she was asking me to pray to God for her...

> One night, in the midst of these trials, I was beside myself, and the Lord spoke to me in Latin, and I understood Him in Spanish...And the understanding and the lifting of the grievous burden came to me at once...

But let me back-track a bit and tell you something more of the life and work of Isabel de Jesús, since as far as I know you are the first, outside a small Castillian town, to hear anything about the undowered and therefore lay nun who came to be called Venerable Mother Isabel de Jesús.

The Castillian shepherdess--rústica pastora and pobre labradora are the epithets by which she repeatedly describes herself--was born in 1586. Despite the fact that she was one of nine children, loneliness was the dominant theme of her childhood. Isabel learned to tend sheep at about the same age Sor Juana learned to read. She spent long solitary hours up in the mountains, terrified of being attacked by wolves. Very early, according to her own account, imagination came to her rescue, providing companionship in the form of religious visions. Surely the major source of this phenomenon was the indoctrination she received from her mother, who "never missed a mass." On the insistence of a brother-in-law she was

married to a toothless old man when she was fourteen. She balked, but her family insisted. By fifteen she was pregnant. She had three children, all of whom died in infancy or early childhood. The marriage lasted twenty-four years. It was a second torment she overcame by a feat of her imagination (the first was her lonely shepherding; there were to be many more). She overcame her repulsion toward her husband by imagining that she was making love to Mary's Joseph. In the world of her visions, she was passionately in love with a protean Christ, who appeared to her as a young shepherd, a royal hunter, a beam of light, a fountain, a gold-ringleted infant. She doesn't make much of the death of her children, but the effect of these tragedies surfaces time and again in the imagery of her religious fantasies.

In one, she sees Christ with engorged breasts nursing dogs. She transforms the metaphor taken from the reality of her own life into a symbol of Christ's mercy. The initial image of a Christ with engorged breasts is startling. But Isabel assures us she knows what she's talking about: when her own babies died she had nursed other women's babies, and even dogs, to relieve the swelling.

Making a living was always difficult; there were constant misfortunes: loss of sheep, of the little land that belonged to her family. She ended up working as a servant in rich people's homes. She had one employer who wouldn't let her out of her sight. Another accused her of robbery. Here Isabel becomes a female counterpart of the picaresque Lazarillo de Tormes. There is much of his world in hers. In addition to working outside her home she had to take care of her infirm old husband, one of whose illnesses lasted six years (she describes his incontinence

and apologizes for finding the wiping and washing up ghastly). As time went on she became more and more of a fanatic, running to communion and confession with such zeal that she aroused the resentment and suspicion of the townspeople. Devils gave her lots of trouble; the scenes she describes are as dramatic and^as charming renditions of hellish characters and episodes as are to be found in the anonymous paintings of Hell at Pisa, or in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. Her imagery leaves no doubt in the mind but that these "persecutions" were the result of her impetuous youth and her frustrated sexuality.

Her husband's death when she was about thirty-eight put her in the position to realize her fondest dream: to be a nun. But there was still an ordeal to undergo. She was accused by her local church of being a false prophet, and was publicly shamed from the pulpit. The phrase in which she sums up^the experience could be mistaken for one by any dramatist of the Golden Age:

> Predicó éste Padre sus honras, y de camino mis deshonras.
> (The priest did his honors, and in passing, caused my dishonor.)

Not one but two preachers were out to get her. When nuns were imported from Salamanca to found an Augustinian convent Isabel was recommended as a servant. The two^priests spread news of the charges against her, and informed the nuns that Isabel had been treated for possession by devils. The nuns, predictably, refused her services, saying that they already had two mad sisters in the convent and that they weren't about to take chances with another. She was finally admitted three years later, after first working as a lay aide to discalced Franciscan monks. She tells how on her first day of work for the Franciscans she had been attacked at the door of

the monastery. She transforms her humiliation into a glorious parallel with the sufferings of Christ:

> A few days after I had been there the men who used to pass by on their way to work began to tease me, since I was a stranger in their town, and stare at me... Then when I had started wearing my burlap robe they saw me going out to do an errand one day. A heavy snow had fallen, and they started to gather stones, and make them into snowballs, which they hurled at me as hard as they were able.

In 1626, at the age of forty, she entered the Augustinian cloistered convent. The day she took the habit the roof of the convent caved in. Considering the susceptibility to superstition they showed on other occasions, it is a wonder the nuns did not expel her on the spot. Her joy at finally being permitted to be a nun was almost destroyed by torments imaginary and real during her first months in the convent. If in the World she had been burdened with an old husband for twenty-four years, in the convent she was hamcered by antagonistic confessors for fifteen. One thought she was possessed. The vicar had been strongly opposed to her being admitted. So violent was the struggle--the trauma of finally reaching her goal? the fear?--that she thought she was losing her mind. She was warring with devils again, and she writes of days and nights spent in constant visionary states. However, her torment confirmed her, in the eyes of many of her fellow nuns and certain of her confessors, as an authentic mystic. It is important to underscore the status Isabel was able to attain within the convent and the sense of power she must finally have found there. In her visions she often played the role of courier and mediator between Christ and her confessors. If she disagreed with a confessor,

she would consult with Christ and promptly return to the confessor with a message from the Savior supporting her own point of view. She always manages to have the upper hand. Impressed by her own revelations, and concerned because Christ and her confessor were in conflict, Isabel felt an urge to learn to read and write. But the Lord advised against it:

> He preferred that I not learn to read or write; for if I had, then people might think that the things I said were taken from books...

She became more and more sure of herself, more and more preachy, and more of a bore. But she also acquired greater theological sophistication. The confidence she gained from knowing she could dialogue with Christ (su Magestad) whenever she pleased gave her a strength of character that was quite impressive, and at times overbearing. The head she had in the heavens was much more real to her than the feet she had on the ground. In her visionary life she transcended the mundane, easily identifying and visiting with the most holy and powerful: St. Catherine of Siena, St. Peter, St. Thomas, St. Theresa, and St. Augustine.

Her life bears a striking resemblance to that of Margery of Kempe, the medieval English fanatic so magnificently portrayed by Louise Collis.[1] Isabel, like Margery, was obnoxiously righteous and driven; so extreme that many people thought her plain crazy and tried to get rid of, or at least keep away from her. To win grace she became grotesque.

Nineteen years after entering the convent and three years before her death, Isabel was assigned a secretary to whom she was asked to dictate her exemplary life for the benefit of nuns to come. She herself was opposed to the idea, feeling herself unworthy of such an exalted task;

but she changed her mind when God sent word that he wanted her to do it. At that point she took it on as a wifely duty, investing the role with further symbolic representations which played into her own fantasies: If the king goes after a shepherdess and asks her hand in marriage, is it just for her to refuse? It's the wife's duty to give in to the husband's desires. In addition to these rationalizations, she gives the following:

> You are with me, pregonera (Spanish for town-crier) of my magnificence; he also called me his trumpet and his carrillon.

←— She was almost sixty-five when she began dictating to Ines del Santisimo Sacramento. But the book was not published till almost thirty years after Isabel's death (1675).

The autobiography is divided into three books. The first has thirty-seven chapters and covers the years of secular life; this section is the most interesting since she discusses her childhood, marriage, and entry into religious life. The forty chapters of Book II span her twenty years as a lay sister. The third book, a seven-chapter appendage written by her confessor, recounts the illness and death of Isabel--a traditional requirement in such biographies--the life and death of her "secretary" Madre Inés del Sacramento, and the opinions of others regarding the miracles and prophecies responsible for "the Saintly fame she left behind her."

There are touches of senility perhaps in the sinuosity, the [illegible] lack of synthesis. Still, the autobiography is quite amazing. Though it was written down, it remains essentially an oral history. With her proverbs, salty dictums and popular wisdom, Isabel calls to mind Sancho Panza; but in her blind conviction that justice and honesty will triumph, in her faith in the realness of her imaginings, she is a Don Quixote; and finally, in

her portrayal of the various points of view--those of her family, of her neighbors, of ecclesiastics in disagreement with each other, of the nuns--one finds a Cervantine perspective that is astonishing in view of the narrowness of her life history. Isabel's autobiography is not a feminist document; it is a document only a feminist would deign to study. It illuminates for the field aspects of the mentality of an epoch and a culture. It is the stuff of El Greco's paintings and of Cervantes' novels.

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Up to this time, because those women who entered convents have been regarded simply as nuns--as religious figures--they have been missed as people. While they may not have attained the kind of power Emily James Putnam was referring to (the kind held by the medieval abbesses), both Isabel de Jesús and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz attained the power to struggle for self-realization. For Sor Juana the convent was the least of evils; for Isabel it was the last stop before heaven. For both of them it was essential. Just as it made possible the autobiographical and poetic work by which, thankfully, we know Sor Juana, it gave rise to the autobiography of Isabel. The convent allowed both women to consider themselves the equals, if not the superiors, of the men around them. Both explicitly claim that equality, Sor Juana on the level of the intellect, Isabel on the level of the spirit.

The fact that Sor Juana's Respuesta is not as widely known as the writings of Saint Theresa, St. John of the Cross, Lope de Vega, or Calderón de la Barca, attests to the need for a new feminist approach

to Hispanic literature (as opposed to the old, which claimed no rights, demanded no reinterpretations). The fact that I have even dared to mention Isabel de Jesús in the same company with Sor Juana attests to the fact that we have begun to make such claims and demands.

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