

6. Three Sisters of Carmen

The Youths of Teresa de Jesús, María de San José, and Ana de San Bartolomé

Barbara Mujica

Abstract

Discalced Carmelite convents were among the few places in early modern Spain in which women from radically different backgrounds interacted as equals. Teresa de Jesús, the daughter of a *converso* merchant, grew up in a large, comfortable household where girls as well as boys acquired literacy. María de San José was the ward of a duchess and raised in a palace, where she received a broad, humanistic education. Ana de San Bartolomé was a peasant with a tendency toward reclusion; she received no formal education. All three women faced difficult issues when young: spiritual struggles, social pressures, and questions of identity. In the convent, they may have discovered that they shared some common, unifying experiences.

Keywords: Discalced Carmelites; Teresa de Jesús (of Ávila); early modern girls' education; María de San José; Ana de San Bartolomé; *conversos*; early modern lesbianism; early modern family

Where in highly hierarchical early modern Spain could women of radically different backgrounds live together like sisters? Perhaps only in a reformed convent such as those of the Discalced Carmelite order. Teresa de Jesús (Ahumada) (1515–1582) was the daughter of a *converso* merchant.¹ María de San José (1548–1603) was the ward of a duchess and raised in an aristocratic household. Ana de San Bartolomé (1549–1626) was a peasant.

¹ The term usually refers to a Spanish Jew who accepted Catholicism during the forced conversions of the late fifteenth century.

Drawing primarily from Teresa's *Life* (1562),² María's *Book for the Hour of Recreation* (1585), and Ana's *Autobiographies* (1607–1624, 1622),³ as well as the little-studied letters of all three, we can form an idea of these women's early years. Despite sharp social and individual dissimilarities, all three experienced stressful youths and, after a difficult struggle, took the veil of Our Lady of Carmen.

Teresa de Jesús (known as Teresa de Ávila in the English-speaking world) launched the Carmelite Reform in 1562, with the foundation of the first Discalced Carmelite convent, San José de Ávila. At the time, religious practice consisted largely of recited prayers and rituals, but Teresa advocated a more authentic, personal relationship with God. In her convents, called 'discalced' or barefoot to signify austerity and poverty, the nuns were to cultivate 'mental prayer', which Teresa saw as an intimate conversation with God. Teresa's reform spread quickly. During her lifetime, she founded seventeen convents throughout Spain. After her death, María and Ana carried the reform into Portugal and Belgium, both Spanish territories. Most early modern Spanish convents replicated the stratified social structure of the surrounding society. However, Teresa strove to mitigate the effects of social rank by banning titles and accepting novices whether or not they could pay a dowry. However, she did maintain the two-tiered system by which black-veiled nuns, usually from more affluent families, performed administrative work and white-veiled nuns performed menial tasks. Yet her custom of keeping convents small and insisting that all members of the household take responsibility for multiple duties meant that women of different backgrounds had to work together and cooperate. Teresa's letters about the social and economic conditions of postulants make it clear that she accepted a wide spectrum of novices. Teresa, María, and Ana did not all live in the same convent at the same time, although they could have. María joined the order in 1571 in Malagón, and in 1575 travelled to Beas with Teresa to make a new foundation. Ana had entered San José in 1570 and, had she not been ill, would have accompanied Teresa to Beas.⁴

2 The first draft; the book went through several revisions.

3 Ana wrote two autobiographies. The first, known as the *Antwerp Autobiography*, consists of fragments written between 1607 and 1624, with a final paragraph added in 1625 or 1626. The second, known as the *Bologna Autobiography*, was written during the second half of 1622 and has not been translated.

4 Teresa, *Collected Works*, I, 50. Subsequent references to Teresa's writings, cited parenthetically by volume and page, are from this translated edition.

The order's foundress, Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada (baptized on 4 April 1515), was of mixed heritage. She was named after her maternal grandmother, Teresa de las Cuevas, a woman of Old Christian pedigree – that is, with no Jewish or Muslim blood. On her father's side, Teresa was the daughter and granddaughter of *converso* merchants. Her paternal grandfather, Juan Sánchez, had been a successful businessman in Toledo, once a thriving community of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but by the end of the fifteenth century a centre of brutal persecution of non-Christians. Even before the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, Sánchez took advantage of an Edict of Grace, which allowed 'Judaizers' to admit to their transgressions and accept Catholicism. He then moved to Ávila, where he became a prosperous silk and wool merchant. *Converso* men often sought to 'cleanse' their lineage by taking Old Christian wives. Juan Sánchez not only married an Old Christian woman, Inés de Cepeda, but even adopted her surname. In turn, Teresa's father, Alonso de Cepeda, married twice, each time to Old Christians. Catalina del Peso died after giving him two children. Beatriz de Ahumada gave him ten more, of whom Teresa was the third and the only girl until the birth of Juana in 1528, the year their mother died. In this large family of twelve children, some took their father's last name while others took their mother's, as was the custom.

Wrangling about the family's Christian identity went on during much of Teresa's youth. In Ávila, her grandfather, Juan Sánchez undertook a *pleito de hidalguía* – a legal procedure to prove his *limpieza de sangre* (Old Christian blood) – and purchased a patent of nobility.⁵ Due to continuing gossip about Juan's Jewish origins, his sons initiated their own *pleito de hidalguía* when Teresa was four years old. Although they won, the procedure must have been harrowing. The brother-in-law of Alonso's first wife provided accounts of the family's public disgrace in Toledo, which compromised their social position.⁶ Teresa was seven when her father secured the *ejecutoria* establishing the family's status as Old Christians, but the process to validate the Cepeda's purity of blood was still going on when she was 22. Although in a private letter to her brother Lorenzo in 1561 Teresa mentions the *ejecutoria*, she never refers publicly to her *converso* background, undoubtedly due to the stigma attached to Jewish blood.⁷ Not surprisingly, as an adult, she often railed against the absurdities of the honour code and required no proof of lineage from her postulants.

5 Egido, *El linaje judeoconverso*.

6 Medwick, *Teresa*, 23.

7 Teresa, *Collected Letters*, I, 36.

Like many boys and girls from *converso* families Teresa learned to read, and she enjoyed access to a variety of books.⁸ Her parents probably provided most of her instruction, with the help of tutors. For a merchant Don Alonso possessed a significant library. Teresa writes in *Life*, 'My father was fond of reading good books, and thus he also had books in Spanish for his children to read' (I, 54). In addition, her uncle Pedro owned copies of Saint Jerome's *Letters*, from which Teresa read to him, and Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. Often referring to herself as ignorant, Teresa knew little Latin and received no advanced training. Yet she read widely for a woman of her time.

As a youth, Teresa loved hagiographies, many of which read like adventure stories. She writes that tales of martyrdom once inspired her to escape from home with her brother Rodrigo in hopes of being decapitated by Moors (I, 55). Although hagiographers traditionally interpret this incident as an example of her early piety, she herself describes it as more of a prank. Teresa also loved novels of chivalry, which she read in secret with Doña Beatriz, even though her father frowned on them and moralists warned that they could have damaging effects on girls. In *The Education of the Christian Woman*, Juan Luis Vives calls them 'pernicious books filled with endless absurdities'.⁹ Nevertheless, Teresa was an obsessive reader of such books: 'I was so taken up in this reading that I didn't think I could be happy if I didn't have a new book' (I, 57). The clandestine nature of their reading surely strengthened the bond between mother and daughter. Writing in her late forties, Teresa looks back on her youth and recognizes these novels as detrimental to her spiritual development, causing her to 'waste many hours of the day and night' in a 'useless practice [...] hidden from my father' (I, 57). As an adult, Teresa seems to harbour some ambiguity toward her mother, whom she credits with guiding her spiritually, but faults for her frivolousness.

Despite moralists' admonitions against girls learning to write, many merchants' daughters did so. Teresa, like her brothers, mastered this skill and made use of it throughout her life. She may even have collaborated with Rodrigo on a romance of chivalry called *El caballero de Ávila*.¹⁰ Teresa also learned the utility of writing in everyday life. Before abandoning commerce because it was considered a *converso* occupation, Don Alonso would have written or dictated hundreds of business letters. If Teresa was a prolific letter-writer and an astute negotiator as an adult, it was certainly because

8 Martz, *Network*, 114–15; Baranda, 'L'Éducation', 30; Yovel, 'Conversos'.

9 Vives, *Education*, 74–75.

10 Marín Pina, 'Caballero', 160.

she had watched her father engage in business activities during her entire youth. Teresa also learned the skills considered essential to a young woman's education: sewing, spinning, and cooking, as well as dancing, chess, and playing musical instruments, although she mastered only the tambourine, which she played her whole life.

Teresa writes that as a child, she learned to pray from her mother, while her father served as a role model by performing charitable acts. When famine threatened Ávila around 1518, Don Alonso donated wheat to feed the hungry. Following his example, Teresa strove to give alms when she could. She writes that her father refused to keep slaves, and when his brother's slave girl lived in their house, Don Alonso treated her like one of his own children. Teresa says that her father enjoyed reading inspirational books, but she does not mention that he was devoted to any particular saint or prayed the rosary (I, 54). Insisting that she was his favourite child, Teresa showed concern for him during her whole life, becoming executrix of his will after his death. Yet some scholars believe that she found him authoritarian. For example, María Carrión suggests that Teresa's decision to take vows may have been a reaction against her father's domination.¹¹ Teresa makes it very clear that her father opposed her entering the convent (I, 63). Still, when she left his house, she was filled with pain so severe that it was as though 'every bone in my body was being sundered' (I, 64). It seems that Teresa was somewhat conflicted about her father. She loved and respected him, yet in this matter was determined to disobey him, no matter how much her decision might hurt him.

The Cepeda-Ahumada brood would have grown up in comfort. Don Alonso was a successful businessman, and his wife brought him an impressive dowry that included houses, a garden and dovecot, some 2000 head of cattle, vineyards and fields.¹² The family lived in a massive, solid house filled with hand-carved furniture and antiques, according to an inventory of household belongings filed shortly before Teresa's birth, and had servants.¹³ As a *converso*, Don Alonso had to keep up appearances. He probably possessed religious paintings and artefacts, but would have been careful to avoid ostentation, as *conversos* were sometimes accused of flamboyance.¹⁴ Because books were luxury items, their abundance in his house attests to the family's affluence.

11 Carrión, *Arquitectura y cuerpo*.

12 Walsh, *Teresa*, 21.

13 Walsh, *Teresa*, 3.

14 Zeldin, 'Catholic Monarchs'.

Growing up in a large household, the young Teresa would have had plenty of playmates. The influence of religion is clear in some of her childhood pastimes. For example, she mentions that she and Rodrigo, influenced by their reading, played at being hermits, and that with other little girls, probably cousins, she sometimes 'pretended we were nuns in a monastery' (I, 55). Because early modern Spaniards generally conceived of childhood as a training ground for adult roles, children usually had little time for free play; Teresa would probably not have had much opportunity for games.

Teresa's relationships with her siblings were mixed. She grew up with brothers, and clearly felt comfortable with men as an adult. Her two sisters were not real companions for her. She speaks of María, 'a sister much older than I', who had little influence on her (I, 58), and of Juana, thirteen years her junior, for whom she 'had no affinity', although she kept her in the convent with her before later negotiating her marriage (I, 272–73). Although biographers have idealized Teresa's family, friction existed among the siblings. Teresa adored Rodrigo and Antonio but did not care much for Pedro, who was apparently mentally disturbed. Retrospectively, she calls him 'crazy' in her letter to Lorenzo of 10 April 1580.¹⁵

In 1528, when Teresa was about fourteen years old, her mother's death altered her life dramatically. Teresa turned for solace to the Virgin; yet, under the influence of some wayward cousins, she became more concerned with popularity and clothes than with prayer. Doña Beatriz had bequeathed to her husband a collar worth 30,000 *maravedíes*, rings, bracelets, earrings and other jewellery, velvet gowns, linen petticoats, silks and cummerbunds of taffeta embroidered in gold, and silk hairnets.¹⁶ As dresses and jewellery traditionally passed from mother to daughter, Teresa would have worn her mother's finery. As an adolescent, she loved fashionable clothes and perfumes. She writes that she was vain about her hair and hands and took excessive pains about cleanliness. Under the influence of her cousins, Teresa participated in activities that she does not name but that probably included some of those condemned by moralists, particularly gossip, strolls, and carriage rides. She would also have attended religious festivals, balls, and local celebrations.¹⁷ Thirty years later, Teresa describes herself as a well-meaning but naïve and malleable youth. She blames Don Alonso for failing to provide her with proper guidance and allowing his affection to place her in a morally vulnerable position (I, 57).

¹⁵ Teresa, *Collected Letters*, II, 298.

¹⁶ Walsh, *Teresa*, 25.

¹⁷ Burke, 'Invention of Leisure', 143

This period in Teresa's life was undoubtedly unsettling. Not only had she lost her mother, but all of her brothers would soon leave for the Americas, where most of them would perish. Furthermore, her father's finances were precarious. In 1524, when Teresa was nine years old, Don Alonso started borrowing heavily. He continued to mismanage his affairs until, at his death, he was seriously in debt. In these troubled circumstances, Teresa began to wrestle with choices about her adult future. At about sixteen, she provoked gossip by becoming involved with a male cousin. Although she says that the young man wanted to marry her, she seems more concerned about the possible sinfulness of their relationship than with the proposal. Doña Beatriz had died immediately after childbirth, so perhaps Teresa was frightened of marriage. She writes that she sees marriage as a form of subjection (III, 306). It may be, too, that she was squeamish about sex, as she writes to her brother Lorenzo about his sexual arousal, that she has 'never experienced this'.¹⁸ Teresa does not articulate what struggles she went through at the time, but Don Alonso put an end to the chatter by placing her as a boarder in the Augustinian convent school of Our Lady of Grace. Her older sister, María, was soon to marry and leave Ávila, and with no female guidance at home, Teresa was in a vulnerable position.

Convent schools were a common solution to such dilemmas. The Augustinian sisters were renowned for their strictness and austerity. Teresa was not drawn to their way of life, and writes that she was then 'strongly against' becoming a nun, but did not want to get married. Yet gradually, under the influence of the novice mistress, María de Briceño, Teresa discovered a strong spiritual inclination (I, 60). During this period, Teresa was often ill, and, in fact, was sickly most of her life. At seventeen, she left the Augustinian convent because of fever and fainting. She went first to her father's house, and then was sent to recuperate with her married sister, who lived in Castellanos de la Cañada. On the way, she spent several days with her Uncle Pedro, who introduced her to the works mentioned above by Jerome and Osuna, from whose *Spiritual Alphabet* she learned recollection and mental prayer. She writes, 'My fondness for good books was my salvation' (I, 63). Around that time Teresa decided to become a nun. At 21, she entered the Convent of the Incarnation, which offered a more relaxed environment than Our Lady of Grace. Despite his opposition to her taking the veil, Don Alonso provided a substantial dowry, including a yearly contribution of large quantities of grain or 200 gold ducats, as well

18 Teresa, *Collected Letters*, I, 475.

as bedding, mantles and cloaks.¹⁹ Teresa professed on 3 November 1537, at age 23, and so concluded her youth.

The lessons of her youth served Teresa well in adulthood. One of the major religious reformers of the sixteenth century, Teresa founded seventeen Discalced convents in spite of the vigorous opposition of Calced Carmelites hostile to the reform. Often at odds with the Carmelite hierarchy, she was severely reprimanded by the Father General, Juan Baptista Rubeo, who in 1575 placed her under virtual house arrest in the convent of Toledo. Yet Teresa managed to extricate herself from these thorny situations. The child of a *converso* businessman, Teresa would have learned early in life the value of diplomacy and negotiation. *Conversos* typically lived defensively, dealing with outsiders with caution and restraint. In her letters, Teresa reveals how delicately she treats even some of her worst detractors. Through the use of tact and charm, skills she undoubtedly developed growing up surrounded by suspicious neighbours, she carried the reform forward.

In contrast, María de San José was often assertive, even combative, when dealing with her superiors. María's youth was dramatically different from that of Teresa, and this certainly influenced the undeferential way in which she later conducted herself with the order's male leadership. Her aristocratic upbringing gave her the self-confidence to confront powerful men in an outspoken and aggressive manner. Born in Toledo, María was undoubtedly of noble background, as she was sent at a young age to be raised at the palace of Doña Luisa de la Cerda, sister of the Duke of Medinaceli and widow of Don Arias Pardo de Saavedra, a close advisor to the king. María's lineage is, however, unclear. She could have been a relative, possibly illegitimate or *converso*, of the Duke and Duchess.²⁰ Doña Luisa had herself given birth to an illegitimate daughter who was raised in the household of the child's father, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza.²¹ After marrying Don Arias, Doña Luisa had seven more children, three of whom died in early childhood.²² Throughout Europe, it was common for noble families to send their sons and daughters to other aristocratic households to be educated. Given her own experience of having to give up a daughter and the tragedy of burying three of her offspring, Doña Luisa might have been delighted to receive

19 Bilinkoff, *Ávila*, 114.

20 Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*; Manero Sorolla, 'Margins'; Weber, 'Volume Editor's Introduction'.

21 Pérez González, 'Doña Luisa de la Cerda'.

22 Four were living in the palace when Teresa visited, but three of them expired in early adulthood.

this brilliant young girl into her home, regardless of the circumstances surrounding her birth.

Naturally, María recounts none of this personal background in *The Book of Recreations*, the closest thing to an autobiography that she produced.²³ Rather than a traditional autobiography, *Recreations* is a kind of psychological self-portrait that enables María to express her opinions and feelings hidden behind a fictional character. Set during the convent 'recreation', or rest period, the text is a colloquy among nuns. The character Gracia, who represents María, expounds on such subjects as women's intellect, prayer and meditation, confessors, and the theological debates of the day. However, the author tells us nothing, either directly or indirectly, about her youth before her first encounter with Teresa. Instead, her self-representation highlights her intellect and literary skills. Both an insider and an outsider at the ducal palace, perhaps she was reluctant to write about her biological parents, or perhaps she hardly knew them. Regardless, the work provides important information about her personality and attitudes that help to explain the battles against Church and Carmelite authorities that defined much of her life.

As a youth in courtly service, María Salazar first met Teresa when the future saint visited the palace of the recently widowed Doña Luisa. Then thirteen or fourteen years old, María was fascinated with the famous holy woman, who reputedly had visions and levitated. María wrote verses for Teresa and spied on her in her cell, witnessing her in ecstasy. Soon María began to imitate Teresa, seeking solitude to pray and meditate. However, when she first approached Teresa about taking vows, the holy woman laughed off the suggestion, calling the girl frivolous.²⁴ María writes that in spite of her prayers and regular confessions with Jesuits, it was difficult to practise piety in the bustle of the court (44). She admits that she was attracted to worldly vanities: galas and outings, pretty clothes and hairdos, and exchanges in which she could show off her intellectual prowess. Yet, court life literally made her ill, for, in her own words, whenever she lost sight of Christ's sacrifice, 'He would take away my health' and then nurse her back afterward (44–45). Like Teresa, María probably became familiar with Saint Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, a form of meditation in which the individual engages the imagination to recreate a scene from Scripture and then places

23 *The Book for the Hour of Recreation*, translated by Powell, is the source for subsequent parenthetical page references.

24 Auclair, *Saint Teresa*, 130–31.

himself or herself in it, through contact with the Jesuits. María's description in *Recreations* of her meditative practices seems to confirm this (51).

Teresa returned a second time to Doña Luisa's palace on her way to found the convent in Malagón. At that time, María witnessed two more of Teresa's ecstasies as well as a miraculous cure, which made her determined to take vows. She was drawn to the kind of mental prayer that the Discalced Carmelites practised, and, she writes, reason convinced her she should become a nun (47). Yet, in spite of these enlightening experiences, María struggled. Although she wanted to take the veil, she still loved the vanities of the world. 'I spent two years in terrible straits', she wrote (51). She was unable to share her anxiety with either her Jesuit confessor or Teresa. However, eventually she came to realize that her attachment to reason was an impediment to her spiritual growth. It took her eight more years to mature into the woman who, in 1570, would finally take vows at the Discalced Carmelite convent in Malagón.

Doña Luisa was interested in girls' instruction on many levels. At the convent, she arranged for a Theatine *beata* to come to teach the local farm girls.²⁵ In her palace, she provided her charges with a broad, humanistic education. Descriptions of the education of elite Spanish women are rare. Nevertheless, according to Helen Nader, 'every action and written record of their adult years reveals a level of education that far exceeds the stereotype of girls simply learning to sew and embroider'. Spanish noblewomen were ordinarily 'literate, numerate, and proficient in Latin'.²⁶ María learned Latin and French at Doña Luisa's court. María did not compose treatises in Latin, but used it in several of her writings. She was also well versed in Scripture and routinely cites the Bible. In *Ramillete de Mirra* (*Bouquet of Myrrh*), which contains a number of legal and ecclesiastical Latinisms, she constructs a meditation on suffering and survival around a verse from Cantic 1.²⁷ *Recreations* includes Latin quotations as well as citations from both Aristotle and Plutarch, although it is not known whether María read these authors in the original Greek or in Spanish (57, 77). Teresa apparently found María's use of Latin annoying, as she comments in a letter that her friend's writing is 'very good, if it were not for that Latin'.²⁸ Elsewhere she writes, 'God deliver all my daughters from presuming to be Latinists'.²⁹ Nevertheless, María

25 Manero Sorolla, 'Margins', 119.

26 Nader, *Power and Gender*, 6.

27 'My love is a bouquet of myrrh; I will place him between my breasts'.

28 Mujica, *Teresa*, 117.

29 Teresa, *Collected Letters*, I, 404.

defends women's studying Latin. In *Recreations*, when Gracia mentions a priest 'who grew very angry when he saw us crossing ourselves in Latin', the character Justa responds that he must have been simple-minded because the Church commands nuns to recite the Divine Office in Latin (37–38). As an adult, María also still remembered some of her French. In 1586, now a woman in her mid-thirties, she wrote in that language to Jean de Brétigny, a nobleman who sought to bring the Discalced Carmelite reform to France.³⁰

María's writings amply reveal her wide knowledge and varied literary skills. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau note that 'her metaphors and similes refer to architecture, painting, and music; to civil and ecclesiastic law; and to the natural order of animals, minerals, and plants'.³¹ In a letter, Teresa jokingly calls María a *letrera* (roughly, 'brain'), a reference to her broad range of knowledge.³² Her use in *Recreations* of the colloquy, an elegant, classical, dialogic form, likens María to male intellectuals of the period. Her language is vivid, energetic, and unabashedly literary. Her prose is carefully structured and rich in rhetorical devices. For example, in *Recreations* she develops *confutatio* through the give-and-take between her characters Gracia and Justa, who constantly call into question each other's assumptions; *modus proferendi* when she advances ideas found in Scripture to elucidate a position; and *paranomasia* when she calls Sister Atanasia an *erizo* ('hedgehog') and *llena de espinas y fealdad* ('spiky and ugly'). She often uses ironic self-deprecation to mock men who demean courageous and smart women. Her stylistic dexterity is evident in *Ramillete de Mirra*, an open letter against her detractors, written to the Discalced Carmelite community between 1593 and 1595. María argues her case like a seasoned attorney – citing evidence, historical precedents, biblical sources, and ecclesiastical documents – and bolstering her authority by citing her long and close association with Teresa. María apparently learned this form of legalistic argumentation at Doña Luisa's court. Similarly, the *Letter from a Poor, Imprisoned Discalced Nun* (*Carta de una pobre y presa Descalza*) is impressive for its logical argumentation, its vivid metaphors, and its erudition, in spite of its familiar, conversational tone. María also studied poetic forms at Doña Luisa's court and composed *redondillas*, *octavas reales*, tercets, and even sonnets. Much of her verse is similar in form and theme to secular erotic poetry, although it is difficult to know if she was actually familiar with Petrarchan tradition.

30 Pérez García, *María de San José*, 34.

31 Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 41.

32 Teresa, *Collected Letters*, II, 46.

Having received a superior education herself, María repeatedly defended women's intellectual abilities and right to learn. In *Recreations*, Justa asserts that there have been many women 'who have been equal and even superior in learning to a great many men' (37). Furthermore, women are better suited than men, she argues, to instruct other women. She returns to the topic in the *Instruction of Novices* (*Instrucción de Novicias*), in which Gracia conflates the biblical characters Deborah and Abigail 'in order to emphasize the foundress's role as mother and teacher'.³³ Although María sometimes mentions the weakness of women, it is always with irony. This same confidence in women's intellectual merit sustained her in her later struggles with the order's male hierarchy.

Two years after Teresa's death, María de San José left for Portugal to found a convent in Lisbon. Although Teresa had designated María as her successor, that intention was never fulfilled. Unlike Teresa, María had not learned the need for restraint and discretion as a youth, and almost immediately she clashed with her superiors. Teresa had given prioresses considerable authority to manage their own convents, but Nicolás Doria, the Provincial, sought to diminish their power and modify Teresa's *Constitutions* to bring them under priestly control. María de San José and another of Teresa's close friends, Ana de Jesús, prioress of the Madrid Carmel, went over Doria's head and appealed for support directly to Pope Sixtus V, who supported the nuns but who died within the year. His successor, Pope Gregory XIV, reversed Sixtus's position in the papal brief *Quinoniam non ignoramus*. María was imprisoned incommunicado in her convent, and Ana was deprived of voice and vote. Doria, later Vicar General, died in 1594. In 1603, Francisco de la Madre de Dios, third Vicar General, sent María to a remote convent in Cuerva, where she soon died.

One can hardly imagine two more dissimilar youths than those of the highly intellectual María and the nearly illiterate Ana de San Bartolomé. Ana was born in El Almendral, near Ávila in rural Spain, the sixth child of parents who owned an estate with farmland and livestock. As a landed peasant, her father would have enjoyed a fairly high social position in the local community, although not as high as that of *hidalgo*. Most likely, her family were Old Christians, as were most rural folk.³⁴ In the *Bologna Autobiography* Ana states only that her parents were God-fearing people and that her father, although a busy man, never faltered in matters of conscience. He gave his sons a basic education, while his daughters learned only catechism,

33 Howe, *Education and Women*, 77–78.

34 Urkiza, 'Introducción' (1981), I, 56.

although Elizabeth Howe suggests that Ana may have also learned to read a little Spanish.³⁵

Unlike Teresa, who depicts herself as a social butterfly in her youth, Ana seems to have been a spiritually intense loner from childhood. Ana states in both her autobiographies that she began to manifest her spirituality as a young child and never wavered in her complete devotion to Jesus. As an illustration of her spiritual precociousness, she notes that when, as a little girl, she heard her sisters remark that children become capable of sin at seven years old, she raised her eyes toward heaven and 'the Lord showed himself to me there with great majesty'.³⁶ Judging from her commentary, she was an introverted child who preferred the company of Jesus to that of ordinary people (38). Her faith was unsophisticated and, from a modern perspective, perhaps even superstitious. When she went out to play with other children, she would ask Jesus's permission first, and when she stopped praying to the saints for a day or two, she became fearful they would become angry.

After her parents died when she was about ten, Ana was assigned the task of tending the flocks. For a child who loved solitude, this was probably an agreeable arrangement. At this point in her life, her relationship with Jesus deepened. When she went off into the fields, sometimes 'the Child Jesus came and sat on my lap' (38). She saw Jesus as a personal friend, a real physical presence, a reassuring companion who appeared to her as a child of her own age and grew as she grew. Sometimes she became so lost in prayer in some solitary place that night would overtake her, causing her brothers to scold her. But, she explains, 'they didn't know the company I was keeping and I never told them' (38). Ana's autobiographies reveal some rather problematic areas of her personality and may help us to understand her later conflicts with male superiors and fellow nuns.

The Jesuit psychoanalyst W.W. Meissner stresses that even though some early modern mystics were actually psychotic, many went on to lead constructive lives.³⁷ Ana is perhaps an example. In a society in which manifestations of the supernatural had notable currency, Ana's familiarity with Jesus might not have seemed so extraordinary; but from the perspective of modern psychology, Jesus and Mary might be seen as surrogates for the parents that Ana had lost. In many *vidas* of this period, including Teresa's, women speak of taking Mary for a mother after the death of a biological

35 Howe, *Education and Women*, 28.

36 Ana de San Bartolomé, *Autobiography*, 37. This text, translated by Donahue, is the source for subsequent parenthetical page references.

37 Meissner, *Ignatius of Loyola*, 320.

mother, and sometimes of seeing her in visions. Today, child psychologists consider surrogates and 'imaginary friends' as a normal phenomenon during early childhood, especially after a traumatic experience such as a death in the family.³⁸ However, even if we interpret Ana's childhood friendship with Jesus as a parasocial relationship born of loneliness, it was certainly also an authentic manifestation of her early spiritual sensitivity.

Other aspects of her social and sexual history are knottier, however. Judging from her autobiographies, she was uncomfortable with her gender as a youth. She writes that in order to devote herself more completely to Jesus, she determined to 'go where no one would know I was a woman' (39). She and a friend, Francisca Cano, arranged to steal away dressed as men and live like hermits. Such desires are certainly no proof of psychological issues, especially in an age when women's activities were so severely restricted. However, some of Ana's later friendships, in particular her almost obsessive preoccupation with Ana de la Ascensión, have raised questions among scholars.³⁹

Ana rejected marriage in spite of opportunities, and far more vehemently than Teresa. Nevertheless, when her plans for a hermitic life failed, she seemed doomed to a conventional existence as her siblings were already making plans to marry her off. Ana was an attractive young woman – strong and healthy, thanks to hard farm work – and her siblings had found a willing fiancé.⁴⁰ Maybe they insisted because a husband, particularly a younger son who did not stand to inherit his own farm, would bring labour assets into the family. Furthermore, as a younger daughter, Ana would have inherited a part of her parents' wealth, and her siblings may have preferred to keep it in the family rather than give it as dowry to a convent.⁴¹ In Spain, daughters could inherit money, clothing, jewellery, and other goods, although not land. Economic factors, the anticlerical attitudes that prevailed in some rural areas, and reluctance to relinquish their sister to a cloister from which she could never emerge might explain the family's strong opposition to Ana's taking the veil.⁴²

All during her teenage years, Ana persisted in her desire to become a nun and have only Jesus as a husband. Her siblings' opposition tormented her, but, she writes, in her dreams, the Virgin and Jesus showed her a convent

38 Taylor, *Imaginary Companions*.

39 Velasco, *Lesbians*, 109.

40 Urkiza, *Beata Ana*, 24–25.

41 Casey, *Early Modern Spain*, 200.

42 Casey, *Early Modern Spain*, 235.

that would someday be hers. She complains in the *Bologna Autobiography* that women simply do not have the option of remaining single.⁴³ During this time, she says, the Devil plagued her with temptations. To combat them, she 'took scourges and lay down naked on the ground in a cave, even though it was damp, until the fury of the temptation died down' (39). Were these temptations sexual? Ana provides no details, but it is clear that the thought of a heterosexual relationship was distasteful to her. She writes in the *Bologna Autobiography* that she told Jesus, if she could find a man as 'beautiful and wise and perfect' as He, she would consent to live with him, but only in a platonic relationship.⁴⁴ Ana appears to transfer the feelings that most women have for men to a super-human surrogate. In her mind, all men were lacking in comparison to Jesus. Ana also recounts that one night in a dream she saw a handsome young man who, to her delight, promised to marry her. Upon awakening, she realized it was Jesus.⁴⁵ In the *Antwerp Autobiography* she tells a slightly different version of the story in which Jesus states, 'I am the one you want and whom you will wed' (40). Repeatedly, she describes Jesus as 'very handsome', and refers to him in erotic terms, often as a spouse who teases and kisses his wife. However, Ana's language should not surprise us, not only because nuns are brides of Christ, but also because the marriage metaphor is so common in mystical writing, with roots in the biblical Song of Solomon.

In her writing, Ana fashions herself as unsuitable for conventional marriage. She recounts that she once appeared before a potential suitor dishevelled and dressed in kitchen rags, infuriating her sister and driving away the man (40). Furthermore, whenever her brothers' friends came to the house, she would go outside or 'make a face at them, as though they were a bad vision' (41). Disdainful of men who might court her, Ana portrays herself as a better man than they are. For example, in a passage in which she describes how her siblings sought to break her will, she writes that they assigned her tasks that 'required the strength of men'. These Ana welcomed as a distraction and performed so easily that 'house servants said that two of them together couldn't do what I was doing' (42). When her siblings demanded that she carry heavy sheaves, she describes, with obvious satisfaction, how her extraordinary strength left men in awe: 'those who were reaping made the sheaves two times bigger than those they made for the men, thinking that I couldn't lift them onto the carts. I lifted them with

43 Ana de San Bartolomé, *Obras completas*, 482.

44 Ana de San Bartolomé, *Obras completas*, 482.

45 Ana de San Bartolomé, *Obras completas*, 483.

great ease, so that the men stopped reaping to watch me, and they were amazed' (42). While others saw her as wilful or even mentally unstable, Ana saw herself as devoted to God, whom she served with 'perfect purity and faithfulness' (41).

Lisa Vollendorf explains that in the seventeenth century, biological sex determined gender; society had no tolerance for deviations from accepted, sex-based norms of behaviour.⁴⁶ Departures from convention such as Ana's were often explained as signs of divine or demonic intervention. Ana notes that observers saw her aberrant physical strength as coming from 'God or the devil' (42). Given her distaste for men and marriage, her transvestite inclinations, and her impressive muscle power, it is tempting to see Ana as a transgendered individual, a woman uncomfortable with her biological sex. However, Ana herself interpreted her eccentricities as divine gifts that enabled her to combat her siblings' efforts to marry her off.

Early modern religious leaders recognized the sometimes close relationship between sexual and spiritual experience. For Teresa de Jesús, such occurrences were unsurprising. When her brother Lorenzo complained of the erotic arousal that accompanied his intense spiritual feelings, Teresa wrote to him, 'don't pay any attention to them'. At the same time, Teresa was wary of close same-sex relationships. She warns against 'particular friendships' that might occasion sinfulness.⁴⁷ She advises nuns against mutual touching or using terms of endearment with one another, and is especially suspicious of intimacy between prioresses and their spiritual daughters, although her main concern seems to be the discord that might stem from such friendships in the form of cliquishness or gossip and favouritism, rather than homosexuality. Having purged herself of 'temptations', Ana possibly channelled her sexual impulses into spiritual episodes. Despite her discomfort with gender norms, there is no clear indication in these passages that Ana imagined physical relationships with women, although her letters include frequent expressions of love for her sisters in religion. In fact, it is not clear that in early modern Spain lesbianism as a sexual category was even on the radar. While Inquisition records document a few same-sex liaisons between women, Vollendorf points out that these were sometimes explained away by 'miraculous' sex changes.⁴⁸

46 Vollendorf, *Lives of Women*, 21. There were exceptions, as illustrated by the popularity of the gay actor Cosme Pérez.

47 Teresa, *Collected Letters*, I, 475; *Collected Works*, III, 27.

48 Vollendorf, *Lives of Women*, 64. In *Immodest Acts*, Judith Brown describes the relationship of the seventeenth-century Italian mystic Benedetta Carlini with her nun assistant.

Although the mysteries of Ana de San Bartolomé's sexuality remain unresolved, it is clear that Ana herself interpreted her struggle against convention as grounding for religious life. She believed that by rejecting men and marriage, she was complying with God's revealed plan for her. The conviction that God was guiding her steps and creating means for her to achieve her goal gave Ana the fortitude to persevere. She writes that God brought to El Almendral a pastor who read her heart and introduced her to a convent, where 'it pleased God that the nuns accepted me right away' (41–42). That convent was San José de Ávila, which Ana recognized as the same one that the Lord had shown her in visions. Yet her siblings' opposition persisted. A brother actually menaced her with a sword and was prevented from killing her only by the intervention of one of her sisters or, perhaps, Ana says, an angel (45). Eventually the family did give their consent, and Ana entered the novitiate in 1570, at the age of 21. She met Saint Teresa in the spring of 1571 and professed as a Discalced Carmelite on 15 August 1572.

Ana writes that her youth was filled with miracles that illustrate God's favour. On one occasion, when she went to look for a lost ox, a rabid dog attacked her. The ox confronted the dog and rescued her, to the amazement of everyone (43). This highly transparent story is a variation of others. Hostile forces (her siblings, suitors, the dog) besiege her, but God sends a messenger (Christ, an angel, the ox) to save her, and all are 'amazed' at the special love God has shown her. Later, when she is out in the flax fields with a kinswoman, she sees three people dressed in white who suddenly disappear. She concludes, 'I knew it was the Holy Trinity' (44). Shortly afterward, she was mysteriously cured of exhaustion upon entering the shrine of Saint Bartholomew. During this period of stress, in which she was facing intense opposition from her brothers and sisters, Ana finds solace in the certitude that at all times God is watching over her.

A woman of extraordinary skill, Ana de San Bartolomé became Teresa's nurse and often travelled with her to make foundations. After Teresa's death, Ana helped carry Teresian spirituality abroad. In 1604, she left Spain with Ana de Jesús and others to establish a Discalced convent in Paris. Ana de Jesús became the prioress, and Ana de San Bartolomé went on to found another convent in Pontoise, returning shortly afterward to take over as prioress in Paris. However, difficulties developed between her and Pierre de Bérulle, an influential cleric who had helped bring the reform to France. As there were no Discalced friars to serve as the nuns' confessors, Bérulle manoeuvred to occupy that role and to exert increasing control over the new convents. He wrested authority from Ana de San Bartolomé and, according to her, humiliated her incessantly. Ana's description of Bérulle's

harassment echoes in many ways her account of her struggles against her siblings when she was young. Ana possessed neither Teresa's diplomatic skill nor María de San José's intellectual prowess. As she had in her youth, she fought her oppressors through faith and obstinacy. Finally, in 1611, she left for Flanders, founding a convent in Antwerp and serving as its prioress for the rest of her life.

Like Teresa de Jesús, both María de San José and Ana de San Bartolomé became involved in serious conflicts with overbearing priests and stood their ground. All three women used the lessons of their youth to help them cope with the vicissitudes of leading a reform movement in a male-dominated society.

Biographers sometimes idealize the youths of religious women, depicting them as periods of innocence and bliss. However, the writings of Teresa, María, and Ana reveal that their formative years were as tumultuous and stress-filled as adolescence today. As girls, Teresa and Ana had to cope with the trauma of loss and separation. Social and financial pressures, spiritual struggles, disagreements with parents and siblings, and questions of lineage, sexual identity, and possibly even legitimacy surely caused these women discomfort when they were young. Teresa knew from experience that the early years could be a period of instability and flightiness, sometimes resulting in girls taking religious vows before they were mature enough to understand what that entailed. For that reason, and because parents sometimes placed little girls of two or three years in convents in order to avoid paying a marriage dowry, Teresa stipulated in the *Constitutions* of the order, Article 21, that novices had to be at least seventeen years old.

Perhaps the convent offered Teresa, María, and Ana not only a spiritual refuge but also a place to come to terms with the vexing issues of their youths. All of them wrote retrospectively about their early years, suggesting that even as adults they were still reflecting on some of the issues that haunted them as girls. Perhaps in the convent they discovered that, despite the differences in class and upbringing, they shared some common, unifying experiences.

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About the author

Barbara Mujica is Professor Emerita of Spanish and Portuguese literature at Georgetown University and a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Her recent scholarly books include *A New Anthology of Early Modern Spanish Theater: Play and Playtext* (Yale University Press, 2014) and *Shakespeare and the Spanish Comedia* (Bucknell University Press, 2013). Her latest historical novel is *I Am Venus* (2014). In 2015, she received a Presidential Medal from Georgetown University for her work with military veterans.

