

# The Value of Female Friendship in Seventeenth-Century Spain

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The topic of women's friendship in the early modern period has proved elusive for literary critics. Male-authored literature abounds with examples of female characters who ally themselves with sisters, maids, and friends; yet female friendship tends to be subsumed by the marriage plots that structure much of the theater and prose fiction. In the Spanish context, this problem is compounded by the image of a masculinist, honor-crazed society projected by travel literature, theater, and historiography. Many canonical works portray women as victims of the honor code, but relatively few female characters stand out for their remarkable strength and characterization.<sup>1</sup>

Dozens of early modern Spanish women writers are known to us today, and scholarship on their texts and lives should help enrich our understanding of European literature and women's history. In addition to writing convent and closet drama, for example, women in Spain wrote plays that probably were destined for the public stage. Moreover, feminist history has much to learn from the Spanish example. Although critics often look to late seventeenth-century English writers for the roots of modern feminist thinking, in 1637 María de Zayas published bestselling texts that denounced "the vain legislators of the world" for rendering women "powerless and deny(ing) us access to pen and sword."<sup>2</sup> Female dramatists' texts and the proto-feminism of Zayas's prose are representative of the fascinating writings and life stories that have been scrutinized in recent decades. As a result of such research, figures as diverse as the crossdressed adventurer Catalina de Erauso, the missionary Luisa de Carvajal, the professional writer Ana Caro, and the nun/playwright Sor Marcela de San Félix have been added to a list that used to include only Saint Teresa as a major female figure.<sup>3</sup>

Writing for public consumption and/or from within convent walls, these and other women brought different perspectives to bear on the dominant literary genres of the period. One of the principal themes shared by their writing is that of female homosociality. Regardless of

genre or intended audience, the texts explore a wide spectrum of possible relationships that women might have with each other. Ranging from competition and betrayal to intimacy and homoeroticism, homosociality occupies a central place in most of the female-authored texts of the period. The following overview of women's self-representation in writing produced for popular consumption and that produced by religious women *intramuros* presents a sampling of seemingly disparate writers who nonetheless valorize the time women spend with each other, refuse to capitulate to a strictly heteroerotic focus, and depict female homosociality as a legitimate—and sometimes lasting—option for women. The choice of writers here is purposefully eclectic, as it is meant to provide insight into a pattern that emerges when we take a thematic approach to women's texts of the period: in the hands of many early modern women from the Iberian Peninsula, the heterocentricism of canonical literature acquires nuance and complexity, as men are pushed to the margins and concerns about female sexuality, friendship, and well-being take center stage.<sup>4</sup>

### I. Women and the Book Market

In spite of stylistic and ideological differences, many connections can be made among the seventeenth-century authors María de Zayas (1590–?), Ana Caro (c.1600–?), and Mariana de Carvajal (1610–?). All three published during a time when few women are known to have enjoyed success in such a venture. By 1637, with the publication of Zayas's *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (*The Enchantments of Love*) and the previous commission of Caro's poems for royal festivities, both Zayas and Caro had begun to pave the way for other women's entry into the publishing world. Widely recognized by their contemporaries as talented authors in their own right, Zayas and Caro apparently sought each other out, as they were reported to be seen together in Madrid.<sup>5</sup> Mariana de Carvajal wrote under trying circumstances. When her husband died in 1656, Carvajal was left with little money to support her and her nine children. While it is unclear whether she turned to writing to supplement her income, Carvajal did choose to cultivate one of the most popular genres of the period; her framed novella collection, *Navidades de Madrid* (*Christmas in Madrid*), received approval for publication in 1663. Written in the tradition of major writers such as Miguel de Cervantes and Alonso de Castillo Solórzano, *Christmas in Madrid* also identifies Carvajal as a direct successor to Zayas, who is widely recognized as the great female *novelista* and as one of the feminist foremothers of Spain.<sup>6</sup>

Women's relationships dominate the plots and thematics of much of these authors' literary production.<sup>7</sup> Working within the conventions of

prose and drama, Carvajal, Zayas, and Caro bring a decidedly distinct perspective to bear on discourse otherwise controlled by men. As the beneficiary of her predecessors' successful intervention in the male-dominated book market, for example, Carvajal produced a volume that strikes a balance between convention and innovation. *Christmas in Madrid* appears to deviate very little from the conventions of the genre; critics tend to see it as conservative in both ideology and style. The frame tale revolves around the affairs of an aristocratic household, for example, and the stories themselves explore the standard themes of marital and familial politics. However, the detailed descriptions of clothing and interiors constitute a unique domestic aesthetic for which Carvajal has been praised and condemned.<sup>8</sup>

Although Carvajal's writing has been viewed as politically disengaged and tediously detailed, the combination of her aesthetic with the focus on female friendship and desire gives her texts an undeniably different flair that distinguishes them from any other novella collection of the century. For example, the extensive descriptions of domestic space highlight the female-focus of the frame tale, in which a widow, Lucrecia, gathers with her closest circle of friends to tell tales during the Christmas season. Aimed at lifting Lucrecia's spirits, the festivities center on the friendship between the protagonist and another widow Juana, and on the courtship rituals of the younger generation.

The emphasis on women's community frames our reading of these tales, as it turns the reader's attention to the female characters' experiences. While Lucrecia and Juana support each other as they make decisions on behalf of their unmarried children in the frame tale, for example, the women in the novellas have varying levels of support for (and control over) their decision-making. The stories that have been translated into English exemplify two common depictions of the female experience in Carvajal.<sup>9</sup> In the fifth tale, "Quien bien obra, siempre acierta" ("Virtue Is Its Own Reward"), women have little power over their circumstances. Esperanza's half-brother beats her when he discovers love letters a man named Luis has written her. Because of enmity between the father and Luis, the male family members prohibit the alliance and arrange for Esperanza to be killed. Luis's brother Alonso rescues her from a certain death, the would-be murderers (her half-brother and a male slave) are punished for their intended crime, and the authorities force the father to allow the original marriage to proceed. Throughout these events, Esperanza is portrayed as the victim of a dishonorable father, who has taken a slave for his lover, and an immoral half-brother, who is the mulatto progeny of the father's alliance. In a transparent act of exchange, male authorities authorize Esperanza's marriage and force the father to sell his lover/slave outside of the city limits. The absence of the

protagonist's mother creates a void in which the daughter falls victim to domestic violence and a nearly successful murder plot.

In contrast to the isolation of Esperanza in "Virtue Is Its Own Reward," women's friendships form the backbone of the juxtaposed sixth tale in the collection. In "Celos vengan desprecios" ("Love Conquers All"), the strong-willed protagonist Narcisa surrounds herself with female friends and rejects the advances of all men but one. Disgusted with arrogant suitors and a justice system that fails to protect her from men's aggressive advances, Narcisa relies on a circle of women for friendship and support. Narcisa's suitors are disrespectful and inadequate, but she leads a fulfilled life surrounded by women whose friendships sustain her. Even when the inevitable knight in shining armor appears and Narcisa decides to marry, the tale emphasizes the important role of female friends. From making decisions based on her friends' wishes to responding to their desire to see her, Narcisa operates within a female-centered community of her own creation.

*Christmas in Madrid* emphasizes women's spaces and relationships, but the text lacks the political punch of Zayas's earlier *Enchantments of Love* and *Disenchantments of Love*. Homoeroticism and female friendship provide an apt point of comparison to demonstrate the differences between the authors' politics. While Carvajal's frame tale culminates with three wedding engagements and her character Narcisa lives in a homosocial world and only shows interest in a heteroerotic alliance when it suits her, Zayas's frame tale protagonist Lisis retreats to the all-female world of the convent in an explicit protest of the treatment of women in society. Accompanied by two friends and eventually joined by her mother, Lisis chooses the convent over marriage. The narrator informs us, "This end is not tragic but rather the happiest one you can imagine for, although courted and desired by many, she did not subject herself to anyone."<sup>10</sup> Lisis's decision is cast as a response to the stories of victimization, in which more than thirty female characters are raped, strangled, poisoned, beheaded, and otherwise abused.

Zayas's emphasis on violence against women finds its complement in a strong endorsement of female solidarity. The female narrators often condemn those women who betray others, for example, and friendships cross class and ethnic lines in some of the tales. The focus on women's alliances and spaces is most apparent in the frame tale, but in the sixth story of *The Disenchantments* it metamorphoses to incorporate female homoeroticism as another facet of women's affective lives. In "Amar sólo por vencer" ("Love for the Sake of Conquest"), a young girl is wooed by a crossdressed suitor who penetrates the protective home environment by posing as a handmaid. Like many literary examples of cross-dressing, Esteban/Estefanía's relationship with the prepubescent Laurela

provides a front for homoerotic exchange. This exchange culminates in an overt defense of same-sex erotic alliances, as Esteban/Estefanía explains that his/her sex bears no relevance on his/her desire for Laurela:

(S)ince the soul is the same in male and female, it matters not whether I'm a man or a woman. Souls aren't male or female and true love dwells in the soul, not in the body. One who loves the body with only the body cannot say that is love; it's lust [. . .].<sup>11</sup>

In the end, Laurela discovers Esteban/Estefanía's true male identity and has sex with him. Then, in punishment for her "corrupt" ways, her family members kill her. While the gruesome outcome of the tale quashes any sense of idealism we might glean from the endorsement of homoeroticism, the first part of the tale engages the topic of female same-sex desire.

Many of the erotically charged interactions between the young mistress and her handmaid take place in front of the servants and family members. The reactions of the others to these expressions of same-sex love offer us, as modern readers, a rare chance to gauge the interpretation of female homoeroticism in the period.<sup>12</sup> The responses to Esteban/Estefanía's expressions of same-sex love appear in the following passage:

[Laurela] and the other women thought it was simply folly, but it amused them and made them laugh whenever they saw her play the exaggerated and courtly role of lover, lamenting Laurela's disdain and weeping from jealousy. They were surprised that a woman could be so much in love with another woman, but it never crossed their minds that things might be other than they seemed.<sup>13</sup>

The women mock their companion's pangs of love, and they also respond with mild surprise. Yet the tone here is one of ambivalence: Laurela, her father, and the household servants seem to take the wooing of one woman by another in stride. The only character mildly bothered by the courtship is Laurela's father, because he wants to have sex with Esteban/Estefanía. The general ambivalence is revealing, for it reinforces the absence of references to female homoeroticism in the legal codes—which only legislated against sodomy—and the written record—which generally lacks reference to female same-sex relations. The ambivalence also provides a rare confirmation of a phenomenon that scholars historically have believed to be true: female same-sex desire did not provoke the same vehement response as male homoeroticism.<sup>14</sup> More revealing, however, is the representation of the community's response to female same-sex desire: viewed as a legitimate, non-threatening, and only slightly surprising possibility, women's desire for each other is portrayed in a positive light.

Although the characters' reactions place this homoerotic tale in a wholly different category from similar literary examples, the crossdressing in "Love for the Sake of Conquest" tempers the glimpse into female same-sex relations. Depictions of same-sex desire involving one crossdressed character are most common in drama, a genre that tends to leave us guessing at contemporary reactions. Ana Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer* (*Valor, Outrage, Woman*, c.1630–40) provides an excellent example of a text that follows the standard plotline toward heteroerotic resolution in marriage and, along the way toward this resolution, also finds room for exploration of homoeroticism and female friendship.<sup>15</sup> Like Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c.1600), Caro's *Valor* hinges on a crossdressed female character who tries to recapture the man of her choice by wooing another woman. The final scenes in the plays share the same denouement and similar rhetoric, with the important distinction that Caro highlights the consequences of women using each other in the service of heteroerotic alliances.

In *Valor* Ana Caro portrays a world in which women must fend for themselves. Seeking to make her ex-lover Don Juan comply with his obligations to marry her, the protagonist Leonor takes the desperate measure of crossdressing in order to woo Juan's latest love interest. As Leonardo, Leonor is so successful in her courtship that the usually disdainful Estela falls for him/her immediately. The message seems clear enough: while Estela struck male suitors as demanding, Leonor/Leonardo easily wins her love because women know what women want.<sup>16</sup> While *Valor* ends with the necessary male-female pairings, the differences between this restoration of heteroeroticism and the resolution of *Twelfth Night* suggest that Caro manages to maintain a sharp focus on women's alliances, even in the final moments of the play.

In *Twelfth Night* Olivia discovers that her love interest, Cesario, is really Viola. In response, Olivia seems to welcome the shift in definition of their relationship, as she cries, "A sister! You are she!" (V.i.325). In *Valor* when Leonor/Leonardo exits as a man and then returns to the stage as a woman, Estela utters almost the exact words as Olivia. Yet Estela first expresses her disenchantment and disbelief when, unlike the other characters on stage at the time, she refuses to accept the female identity of her lover and uses the masculine name to ask, "Leonardo, you were deceiving me?" Leonor responds, "It was necessary, Estela."<sup>17</sup> This is the only moment in the play in which both women know the sex of the other, and, like many other examples of homoerotic interaction, it is a fleeting moment. But the articulation that the heteroerotic imperative necessitates such betrayal between women gives an edge to an otherwise commonplace ending. Only after the expression of dismay do we arrive at the sisterly alliance similar to that of *Twelfth Night*. Estela speaks first to Leonor (and not to the man she will marry) when announcing her intentions, "Let us remain sisters,

fair Leonor."<sup>18</sup> Solidifying a permanent, sororal bond, Estela then takes the initiative in asking Leonor's brother for his hand.

As these examples suggest, Carvajal, Zayas, and Caro portray some headstrong female characters yet often remain within the conventions of their chosen genres in terms of plot resolution. However, their representations of female friendship and eroticism explore territory not charted out by male authors of the period. All three authors focus more on female than male characters and on a variety of relationships between women. Carvajal's emphasis on female characters and domestic detail is complemented, for example, by Zayas's depiction of the convent as a safe space for women. Moreover, all three authors depict homosocial worlds that include, in Zayas and Caro, homoeroticism. While homosocial networks support many of the female characters, when it comes to eroticism all three authors rely on male-female alliances for closure in much of their work. Only Zayas, whose novellas are populated with married women, imagines a resolution outside of the heteroerotic economy: in *Lisis* she creates a character who rejects marriage in favor of the convent. This overview suggests that women authors probed female alliances with a greater intensity than their male counterparts, exploring the importance of female friendship, highlighting the sacrifices women make to the heterosexual economy, and, in the rare example of Zayas, explicitly endorsing homoeroticism as a legitimate manifestation of female desire.

## II. Intramuros: Convent Literature

In spite of the fluid configurations of female same-sex desire in many texts written for the public eye, literary convention dictated that friendship be sacrificed to heteroerotic alliances and that women's concerns be given over to men's. Convent writing responded to a different readership and different rules. Women religious wrote in response to their confessors' requests, as a means to instruct other nuns, for purposes of correspondence, and for convent festivities. Guided by the formulas of hagiography, nuns cultivated a wide variety of genres that included *vita* (biography and autobiography), letters, poetry, instruction and prayer manuals, and even drama. As Caroline Walker Bynum and others have shown, eroticism occupied a central place in such texts; metaphors of marriage, sexuality, and sensuality often refer to human relationships with God.<sup>19</sup> While the patriarchal structure of the church and of Christianity influence the rhetoric and thematics of religious writing, convent literature contains a multifaceted treatment of women's relationships with each other.

A sonnet by Sor Violante do Ceo (1601–93) captures the intensity of such relationships and provides a framework for thinking about female

friendship.<sup>20</sup> Most likely written for the writer Doña Bernarda Ferreira, the sonnet speaks in terms of commodities and value:

Belisa, friendship is a treasure  
 so deserving of eternal estimation  
 that it is insufficient to measure its worth  
 against the silver and gold of Arabia and Potosí.  
 Friendship is a precious honor  
 that one treasures in presence and in absence;  
 and through which one shares the sadness, sorrow,  
 smiles, and tears of another.  
 A bond of violence is not a friendship,  
 for friendship is based on sympathy,  
 from which loyalty reigns until death:  
 This is the friendship that I would like to find,  
 this is what lives on between friends,  
 and this, Belisa, in the end, is my friendship.<sup>21</sup>

While the sonnet emphasizes loyalty and interdependence, its most compelling lines refer to questions of value and exchange. Sor Violante's reference to the spoils of overseas exploration contrasts hard currency with the immeasurable worth of an emotional bond: friendship is a treasure more valuable than the most exotic riches of the world. The sonnet thus localizes and interiorizes the question of worth, rejecting the market economy for an emotional economy.

As suggested by Sor Violante's poetry, the value of female friendship for cloistered nuns cannot be underestimated. Convent literature refers to many configurations of female relationships. Logically enough, writers often invoke the language of sororal and maternal bonds. One of the best examples of such language appears in Sor Angela María de la Concepción's *Riego espiritual para las nuevas plantas* (*Watering the Spirit of New Plants*, 1691). Founder and prioress of the Trinitarian Convent of the Recoletos in Toboso, Sor Angela wrote this spiritual instruction manual for the nuns of her order. Like similar texts, most famously those of Saint Teresa, *Watering the Spirit* guides women in their quest for exemplary spirituality. Using the Teresian metaphor of plants that constantly need water in order to grow, Sor Angela emphasizes that "all of our life on earth is a continuous battle, which is experienced not only in temporal life, but also, and with even more liveliness, in the life of [spiritual] perfection."<sup>22</sup> She goes on to call her religious sisters warriors "who, with a manly spirit, have signed up under the banner of their husband."<sup>23</sup> With its commonplace references to God as husband and to spirituality as a military endeavor, the spiritual tract aims to prepare women for the battle against earthly temptations.



Most striking in Sor Angela's text is the intimacy with which she addresses her sisters. In one of the opening sentences, for example, she refers to the nuns as "my dear loved ones, servants of God, humble little flock of the Church, new plants of Religion."<sup>24</sup> Over and over, she calls the nuns *carísimas hermanas* and *hijas*—dear sisters and daughters. The use of the plural first person pronoun *nosotras* also adds intimacy to the text, as Sor Angela includes herself as someone fighting for spiritual perfection on earth: "But let us not lose faith or hope; let our faith, hope, and love in God be revived."<sup>25</sup> The occasional use of the first person in the advice manual creates a sense of equality; it emphasizes that all of the women, regardless of rank in the convent, must work to perfect themselves spiritually.

As *Watering the Spirit* demonstrates, convent writing often highlights the emotional intensity of an almost entirely homosocial community. Convent texts also provide an excellent reality check for those of us interested in reconstructing the contours of women's relationships. While the focus on female characters in other literature might tempt us to idealize women's representations of friendship and to gloss over dissension between women, convent writing is grounded in day-to-day details that capture the difficulty of cloistered life and the tensions that arise among members of the community.<sup>26</sup> Discussions of daily discord are common. Sor Angela warns, for example, "All creatures, my sisters, are obligated to serve God, and for this they won't be lacking in fights and difficulties to overcome."<sup>27</sup> Read in the context of religious women's writing, this cautionary statement should be taken as a reference to both spiritual and domestic challenges.

Sor Catalina de Jesús's spiritual biography details the social and domestic pressures of the convent while also providing a fairly complete sketch of the network of relationships in one woman's life. While this *vita* was written by Sor Catalina's son, Juan de Bernique, it purportedly cites verbatim from her letters and previous autobiographies. Bernique, himself a priest, builds a standard hagiographic narrative around his mother's words.<sup>28</sup> The story of Sor Catalina's journey from reluctant wife and mother to contented bride of Christ justifies the nun's rejection of motherhood as a pre-destined result of her spirituality. While the text has the clear intention of glorifying the nun's spiritual exemplarity, it also communicates the pressures facing women as wives, mothers, and nuns.

Like other *vitae*, Sor Catalina's text discusses the young woman's reluctance to marry and her distaste for sex. In so doing, it delineates one of the major social pressures on young women in Spanish society:

All of the creatures plotted against me with every means that one can imagine so that I would marry. I entered into marriage with such disgust and so much hatred; I can't really say where this came from.<sup>29</sup>

The primary source of this "plotting" against the young orphan was her aunt, who plays a pivotal role in the auto/biography. Catalina finally capitulated and married a man much older than she, had several children by him, and then was widowed at a relatively young age. Rather than remarry, Catalina de Bernique left the children in her aunt's care and took religious vows.

Sor Catalina's relationships with other women add a dimension of complexity to the auto/biography. On the one hand, she relies on her aunt as a caregiver to herself (as a child) and to her children. The aunt opposes her becoming a nun, complains about Catalina's dangerous practice of dragging her children along to attend to the sick and the poor, and intervenes when Catalina's bodily mortification becomes too excessive. Yet the auto/biography portrays Catalina as the dutiful daughter who vows "to kiss the hand of her aunt every night in gratitude."<sup>30</sup> The familial tensions continued well into Catalina's life as a nun. The picture that emerges gives us insight into the entrepreneurial endeavors of two spirited women. According to her son, Sor Catalina came to believe that she was destined to found a school for young girls in her home, but she faced certain difficulties because her aunt's house:

was often frequented by people from the university because the art of printing was taught there; and so the first task that she took on was to rid the house of this exercise because a place that had a stream of people coming through daily could not be a good place to have a school for young girls.<sup>31</sup>

The aunt purportedly resisted, saying she did not want her home filled with "other women's daughters," nor did she want to be "thrown out or have her livelihood taken away."<sup>32</sup> In spite of this tension, the women worked together to found the school. Catalina's attention to her ailing aunt perhaps offered certain compensations for the many impositions she placed on her older relative, who had an eye problem that, in Bernique's estimation, "could have disgusted anyone with even the strongest stomach." Yet Catalina "went every morning to her aunt's bed and licked and cleaned all of the excretions" until the infection subsided.<sup>33</sup>

The text also emphasizes connections between Sor Catalina and other women, who figured as spiritual guides, mentees, and friends. At the same time, the text reveals the culture of fear surrounding female spirituality in seventeenth-century Spain, demonstrating the success of the Inquisition in making women suspicious of each other. Bernique takes care to distinguish his mother's spirituality—including the miracles she performed and the visions she had—from the "insolent women who, with diabolical astuteness, profaning the name of *beata* [. . .], wore the

habit of sanctity in order to hide their insolence [and] their vices."<sup>34</sup> The trial of one such *beata* (lay religious woman) was used by Catalina's confessor as an occasion to punish his charge for her vanity: he ordered Catalina to walk through the streets the day after the *beata* had been punished publicly in the same area. Sor Catalina's piety prevented her from hearing the insults hurled at her as she walked through the streets oblivious to anything but God's will. On other occasions, however, Sor Catalina suffered great anxiety, much of which related to people's comments that she should beware of the Inquisition. Eventually the Tribunal did call her in to testify, but then released her without punishment.

Logically enough, the *vita* of Sor Catalina de Jesús focuses on her exceptional spirituality and her accomplishments within the church. The tensions between biography and autobiography, and between a mother's rejection of family and her son's impulse to justify his mother's actions add a fascinating dimension to the text. While the thread of women's interdependence runs throughout the narrative, the many references to "diabolical *beatas*" and to arguments between Sor Catalina and her aunt suggest that women's relationships with each other were fraught with difficulties. Sor Catalina's *vita* puts these tensions into relief, showing that some of these difficulties stemmed from deep-rooted social pressures on women (i.e., marriage and motherhood) and some of them were borne out of the specific situation of a woman whose calling lay not with her family but with the Catholic church.

Juan de Bernique's text details the toll taken by the daily physical and spiritual work performed by nuns. Yet, as the plays of Sor Marcela de San Félix (1605–1688) and other nuns confirm, religious women also found time for recreation and humor.<sup>35</sup> Sor Marcela wrote several *coloquios espirituales* (spiritual colloquies) that were performed by nuns, some of whom had to dress as men to represent the male characters. Sor Marcela, daughter of the famous playwright Lope de Vega, was no stranger to theater. Her plays combine a mastery of language with a sharp wit; the end product is a corpus of allegories about the struggles of flesh and spirit.

Sor Marcela's brilliantly funny *Coloquio espiritual de la muerte del apetito* (*Spiritual Colloquy of the Death of Desire*) details the fight of several female characters against the evil, slothful Desire (*Apetito*). Three sisters—Mortification, Simplicity, Prayer—come together to support the Soul in her battle against Desire. Tormented by her natural inclination toward all of the different appetites (hunger, sexuality, gluttony) represented by the character Desire, the Soul relies on the female characters to bolster her resolve to lead a spiritual life. The text begins with the banishment of Mortification from the Soul's life. But once the Soul calls her a friend a "nasty, obstinate, and foolish woman" and sends her away, all of the troubles start with the male character Desire.<sup>36</sup> The friendship

between the Soul and Mortification forms the backbone of the play, as Mortification returns (with reinforcements) to protect the Soul from the seductions of Desire. Jokes about the gluttony of friars and the stinginess of nuns in charge of dispensing food are peppered throughout the play.

By the end of *Death of Desire*, the Soul has vanquished Desire with the help of Mortification and her sisters. Desire initially refuses to die, but finally the women manage to hold him down and kill him. Portrayed as a glutton and trickster ("burlador"), Desire represents the temptations of the physical world. The nurturing, if not always easy, relationships among the female characters form a solid front against these temptations. The strong pull of the male character Desire is counterbalanced and finally conquered by the women's support network. The gender dynamics reflect those of cloistered life, in which nuns relied on confessors and priests for their spiritual directives, but had to live with and depend on each other in their daily lives. And, as Arenal and Schlauf have noted about Sor Marcela's *oeuvre*,

Playful but pointed interchanges in the *coloquios* and *loas* regarding the scarcity of food, the stinginess of those Sisters assigned to provide meals, the hypochondria of some nuns, the fierce temperaments of a few and the strictness of others, show that daily existence in the convent often bore little resemblance to the idealized portrayals created for consumption *extramuros*.<sup>37</sup>

Sor Marcela adeptly combined humor, playfulness, and biting comments, all of which add to the rich historical and literary value of her writing.

For all of its variability in genre, style, and purpose, literature produced in the convent emphasizes the importance of women's alliances with each other. Women's networks emerge as one of the chief themes in poetry, drama, and *vitae*. As Sor Violante's discussion of the value of friendship suggests, convent life generated—indeed, required—strong bonds among women. For scholars interested in women's history, the depictions of female friendship in convent writing are valuable precisely because they cover the positive and negative aspects of the bonds that women forged with each other.

### III. Women's Self-Representation

Due to the demands and constraints placed on writers in different contexts, a wide range of texts needs to be examined if we are to come to a more nuanced understanding of women's friendship in the early modern period. Women's literature produced for public consumption in seventeenth-century Spain responded to literary traditions dominated by men.

Likewise, discussions of God the father and the father confessor occupy center stage in much convent literature, and discussions of male-female relations dominate much "secular" literature. But, as the texts of Carvajal, Zayas, and Caro demonstrate, women inserted themselves into these traditions by shifting the focus to female characters and concerns. The differences between literature produced for the book market and that produced in the convent relate to questions of genre, representation, and audience. Plays and prose written for the public explore women's alliances and desires, and almost inevitably return to the marriage endings common to most literature of the period. Even Zayas's surprising endorsement of same-sex desire has limits. Her tale "Mal presagio casar lejos" ("Marriage Abroad: Portent of Doom") vilifies male homosexuality, depicting a woman who "saw her husband and [his page] Arnesto engaged in such gross and abominable pleasures that it's obscene to think it, let alone say it." The wife is so appalled by this "horrendous and dirty spectacle" that she burns the bed.<sup>38</sup> Even the crossdressed man in "Love for the Sake of Conquest" rejects and denigrates lesbian desire when he asks: "Who's ever seen a woman fall in love with another woman?"<sup>39</sup>

Critics interested in the early modern period might benefit from thinking about this question in terms of access to women's self-representation. Women's literature from the Spanish Golden Age allows us to "see" the love that existed between female family members and friends. It allows us to imagine, in the case of writers as daring as Zayas, the possibility of female same-sex desire. It allows us to gain insight into the social networks that sustained women in their various roles as writers, mothers, wives, nuns, and abbesses.

Until recently, we have not even had access to women's texts, so certainly we have not had the opportunity to reconstruct the contours of women's lives. The literature produced for the book market tells us as much about what was acceptable to the larger society as it does about the concerns of women in the period. Convent literature, on the other hand, provides a more intimate glimpse into the daily lives of women who lived, prayed, and worked together in the cloister. Other sources, such as letters and diaries, remain to be tapped as well. Moreover, the Inquisition required that defendants tell their life stories, and these *memoriales* constitute a genre that has yet to be studied in terms of self-representation. Even this brief, thematic overview of women's writing from the period suggests that, if we read texts produced in a range of contexts, we can reach a nuanced understanding of the value of women's friendship in early modern Europe.

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## NOTES

1. Books that attend to the question of honor during Spain's early modern period include: Marcelin Defourneaux, *Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age*, trans. Newton Branch (NY: Praeger, 1966); Edwin Honig, *Calderón and the Seizures of Honor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972); Matthew Stroud, *Fatal Union: A Pluralistic Approach to the Wife-Murder Comedias* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1990). As to men's representations of women in early modern literature, Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley have stated, "for a male author to write women in these periods was to refer not to women, but to men" (Introduction, *The Lady Vanishes. The Problem of Women's Absence in Late Medieval and Renaissance Texts* [Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989, 1–17]: 4).

2. María de Zayas y Sotomayor, *The Enchantments of Love*, trans. H. Patsy Boyer (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990): 175. For an analysis of Zayas in the context of other "feminist" novella writers, see Josephine Donovan, "Women and the Framed-Novelle: A Tradition of Their Own," *Signs* 22.4 (1997): 947–80. Throughout the article, I provide original Spanish quotations for texts that are not available in modern editions. I have modernized spelling and punctuation from original texts.

3. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson have noted that the increased numbers of modern editions of women's writing "have only begun to alter our sense of the lives of early modern women" and that such editions "have been crucial to our examination of women's alliances because they offer more direct access to women's self-representation" (Introduction, *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* [NY and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999, 3–17]: 7). The most accessible collection of early modern Spanish women's writing appears on microfiche in *Escritoras españolas, 1500–1900* (Microfiche catalogue. Madrid: Chadwyck Healey España, 1992–93). Many translations of women's texts are available as well, including: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *La respuesta/The Answer*, ed. Electa Arenal and trans. Amanda Powell (NY: Feminist Press, 1994); Zayas's previously cited *Enchantments of Love* and *The Disenchantments of Love*, trans. H. Patsy Boyer (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997); Zayas's play, *La traición en la amistad/Friendship Betrayed*, ed. Valerie Hegstrom and trans. Catherine Larson (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1999); Catalina de Erauso's *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*, trans. Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto (Boston: Beacon, 1996); and *Viva al Siglo, Muerta al Mundo. Selected Works by María de San Alberto, 1568–1640*, ed., trans., and intro., Stacey Schlau (New Orleans: UP of the South, 1998). Excellent critical studies on Spanish women include: Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1989); Mary Giles, ed. *Women in the Inquisition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); Bárbara Mujica, *Sophia's Daughters: Women Writers of Early Modern Spain* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004); Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990); and Sherry Velasco, *The Lieutenant Nun* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000).

4. For more on women's writing in Spain's long seventeenth century, see Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2005).

5. Julián Olivares calls the two women "intimate friends" and, based on comments by Caro and by fellow writer Castillo Solórzano, postulates that perhaps the two women lived together when Caro arrived in Madrid in 1637 (Olivares, intro. and ed., *María de Zayas y Sotomayor, Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* [Madrid: Cátedra, 2000]: 9–147): 14).

6. For more on Caro's career, see Ruth Lundelius, "Ana Caro: Spanish Poet and Dramatist," *Women Writers of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Frank J. Warnke (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989): 228–50; Amy Katz Kaminsky, "Ana Caro Mallén de Soto," *Spanish Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, ed. Linda Gould Levine, Ellen Engelson Marson, and Gloria Feiman Waldman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 86–97; and Lola Luna, "Ana Caro: una escritora 'de oficio' del Siglo de Oro," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 72 (1995): 11–26. On Zayas and Caro, see Elizabeth Ordóñez, "Woman and Her Text in the Works of María de Zayas and Ana Caro," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 19 (1985): 3–15; and Teresa Soufas, *Dramas of Distinction* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1997). Book-length studies on Zayas include: Marina S. Brownlee, *The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000); Margaret R. Greer, *María de Zayas Tells Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2000); and Vollendorf, *Reclaiming the Body: María de Zayas's Early Modern Feminism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001).

7. Caro's poems, written for royal occasions and public festivities, are one exception to this focus.

8. Until recently, most critics disparaged Carvajal's literary abilities (see Agustín de Amezuá, "Formación y elementos de la novela cortesana," *Opúsculos histórico-literarios*, Tomo I (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1951): 194–279; and Manuel Serrano y Sanz, "Carvajal y Saavedra (Doña Mariana de)," *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritoras españolas desde el año 1401 al 1833*, Tomo I (Madrid: Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1903: 236–44). Other critics have praised what they see as her realistic style (see Caroline Bourland, "Aspectos de la vida del hogar en el siglo XVII según las novelas de Doña Mariana de Carabajal y Saavedra," *Homenaje ofrecido a Menéndez Pidal*, Tomo II [Madrid: Librería y Casa Editorial Hernando, 1925]: 331–68; Julio Jiménez, "Doña Mariana de Carvajal y Saavedra, *Navidades de Madrid y noches entretenidas, en ocho novelas*, Edición crítica y anotada." Diss. Northwestern U, 1974; and Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, "Introducción," *Novelas amorosas de diversos ingenios del siglo XVII* (Madrid: Castalia, 1987: 9–69). See J. Jiménez (15–16), and Rodríguez Cuadros (39–40, n.76) for discussions of previous criticism of Carvajal's work.

9. The translations appear in Noël M. Valis, "Mariana de Carvajal: The Spanish Storyteller," *Women Writers of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson and Frank J. Warnke (Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1989): 251–82.

10. Zayas, *Disenhancements*: 405.

11. *Ibid.*, 224.

12. As in other countries, Spain's history of lesbianism is more veiled than that of male homosexuality: the Inquisition prosecuted men, and only a few women, for sodomy. Aside from this, research has discovered little on the written record that would give more insight into contemporary attitudes toward same-sex relations between women in Spain. See Pedro Herrera Puga's dated but informative

*Sociedad y delincuencia en el siglo de oro* (Madrid: Editorial Católica, 1974), especially 246–69; Gregory S. Hutcheson and Josiah Blackmore's introduction to *Queer Iberia. Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1999): 1–19; and Perry, "The 'Nefarious' Sin in Early Modern Seville," *Journal of Homosexuality* 16.1–2 (1988): 67–90.

13. Zayas, *Disenchantments*: 217. The translation is modified slightly from Boyer's.

14. Bernadette Brooten's *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), refutes earlier scholarship that suggested that female same-sex desire did not register as negative in Christian cultures. For studies on female same-sex desire in the early modern period, see Mary Gossy, "Skirting the Question: Lesbians and María de Zayas," *Hispanisms and Homosexualities*, ed. Sylvia Molloy and Robert McKee Irwin (Durham: Duke UP, 1998): 19–28; Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); and Velasco, "Early Modern Lesbianism on Center Stage: Cubillo de Aragón's *Añasco el de Talavera*," *Lesbianism and Homosexuality in Early Modern Spain*, ed. María José Delgado and Alain Saint-Saëns (New Orleans: UP of the South, 1999): 306–21.

15. A translation of Caro's play appears in Amy Katz Kaminsky, *Water Lilies/Flores del agua. An Anthology of Spanish Women Writers from the Fifteenth through the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 206–348. I use my own translations for quotations from the play and provide line numbers based on *Valor, agravio y mujer* from Soufas, *Women's Acts* (206–348).

16. I read the interaction between the crossdressed Leonor and Estela as homoerotic. However, Teresa Soufas has noted that the courtship scene can be read as a female perspective on ideal heteroerotic courtship, a model of women's "mutual recognition of what is truly appealing to them with regard to love and devotion" (Soufas, *Dramas*, 120).

17. In the original, Estela says, "Leonardo, ¿así me engañabas?" Leonor responds, "Fue fuerza, Estela" (Soufas, *Women's Acts*, ll. 2730–31).

18. "Quedemos / hermanas, Leonor hermosa" (*ibid.*, ll. 2732–33).

19. For studies on the body and Christian religious experience, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (NY: Zone, 1992) and *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982); Kathleen Canning, "The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History," *Gender and History* 11.3 (November 1999): 499–513; Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume I. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994); and Ronald E. Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain. The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995).

20. While Sor Violante cannot be considered a Spanish author strictly speaking, I include her here because she wrote both in Castilian and Portuguese and because she was born during the period of Spain's annexation of Portugal.

21. "Belisa, el amistad es un tesoro / tan digno de estimarse eternamente, / que a su valor no es paga suficiente / de Arabia, y Potosí la plata y oro. / Es la amistad



un lícito decoro / que se guarda en lo ausente y lo presente, / y con que de un amigo el otro siente / la tristeza, el pesar, la risa, el lloro. / No se llama amistad la que es violenta, / sino la que es conforme simpatía, / de quien lealtad hasta la muerte ostenta: / Esta la amistad es que hallar querría, / ésta la que entre amigas se sustenta, / y ésta, Belisa, en fin, la amistad mía" (*Tras el espejo la musa escribe: lírica femenina de los Siglos de Oro*, ed. Julián Olivares and Elizabeth Boyce [Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1993]: 271).

22. "Toda nuestra vida sobre la tierra es una guerra continua, la cual se experimenta, no sólo en la vida temporal, sino también, y aún con más viveza en la vida de perfección" (Angela María de la Concepción, *Riego espiritual para las nuevas plantas* [Madrid: Melchor Alvarez, 1691]: 6).

23. "Y combatientes en guerra tan continuada . . . son las Religiosas, que con ánimo varonil se han alistado debajo de la bandera de su esposo" (*ibid.*, 11).

24. "Carísimas mías, amadas, siervas del Señor, rebañito humilde de la Iglesia, plantas nuevas de la Religión" (*ibid.*, 10).

25. "Pero no nos desconsolamos, y aflijamos, avívese nuestra fe, esperanza, y caridad en este Señor" (*ibid.*, 84).

26. Jessica Tvordi has cautioned against idealizing representations of women's interaction and has urged critics to "desentimentalize female homoerotic alliances" ("Female Alliance and the Construction of Homoeroticism," in Frye and Robertson, 114–30): 116.

27. "Todas las criaturas, hermanas, están obligadas a servir a Dios, y para esto no les faltaran peleas y dificultades que vencer" (Angela María de la Concepción, 21).

28. Like other *vitae* authored by male confessors, Catalina de Jesus's auto/biography raises questions about authenticity and authorship. On these topics, see Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives. Confessors and their Female Penitents, 1450–1750* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005); and Marie-Florine Bruneau, *Women Mystics Confront the Modern World: Marie de l'Incarnation (1599–1672) and Madame Guyon (1648–1717)* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1997).

29. "Conjuráronse contra mí todas las criaturas, y todos los medios, que se pueden pensar, para que esto se consiguiese. Entraba con tal disgusto en el matrimonio, y con tanto aborrecimiento, que no puedo decir con verdad de a dónde me venía [. . .]" (Juan de Bernique, *Idea de perfección, y virtudes. Vida de la V. M. y sierva de Dios Catalina de Jesús y San Francisco* [Alcalá: Francisco García Fernández, 1693], fol. 19).

30. Catalina is quoted as writing, "Besaré la mano a mi tía todas las noches en muestra de rendimiento" (*ibid.*, fol. 73).

31. "Porque la casa en que vivía con su Tía era muy frecuentada [*sic*] de gente de Universidad por causa de tener en ella el arte de la imprenta; y así la primera diligencia en que se empeñó fue desocuparla de este ejercicio porque no podía ser buena escuela de doncellas donde era tan frecuente y cotidiano el concurso de la gente" (*ibid.*, fol. 273).

32. Bernique writes that his aunt yelled at his mother's suggestion of a girls' school: "No tiene bastante de que cuidar con sus hijos, y no buscar los ajenos; no basta que la haya yo criado, y gastado con ella lo que no tengo, sino que también me quiera echar de mi casa, y llenármela de hijas de otras madres; quitarme lo que me da de comer [. . .]" (*ibid.*, fol. 273).

33. The sickness was so revolting, according to Bernique, "que pudiera causar asco al estómago más fuerte, y menos melindroso. [. . .] Iba [Catalina] todas las mañanas a la cama y con la lengua lamía y limpiaba toda la inmundicia" (ibid., fol. 226).

34. "Hubo en tiempos que mi V[enerable] M[adre] vivía, muchas insolentes mujeres que con diabólica astucia, profanando el nombre de Beata y acogíendose al sagrado de la virtud, se ajustaron el hábito de santidad para paliar sus insolencias, ocultar sus vicios [. . .]" (ibid., fol. 167).

35. Partial editions of the work of Sor Marcela and another nun, Sor Francisca de Santa Teresa, appear in *Teatro Breve de Mujeres (Siglos XVII–XX)*, ed. Fernando Doménech Rico (Madrid: Asociación de Directores de Escena de España, 1996); also see Marcela de San Félix, *Obra completa: coloquios espirituales, loas y otros poemas*, ed. Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat-Rivers (Barcelona: PPU, 1988). A translated, abridged version of "Death of Desire" appears in Arenal and Schlau, 250–68. For more on convent drama, see Arenal and Schlau; Elissa Weaver, "The Convent Wall in Tuscan Convent Drama," *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Craig A. Monson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992): 73–86; and "Suor Maria Clemente Ruoti, Playwright and Academician," *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy*, ed. E. Ann Mater and John Coakley (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994): 281–96.

36. Soul says, "What a nasty woman! . . . How obstinate and foolish" (Arenal and Schlau, 252).

37. Ibid., 243.

38. Zayas, *Disenchantments*: 265.

39. Ibid., 227.

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