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*María Vela y Cueto:
Autobiography and Letters of a Spanish Nun.*
Ed. Susan Diane Laningham. Trans. Jane Tar.
Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies:
Tempe, 2016. PB. 176 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-86698-559-8

Susan Diane Laningham and Jane Tar have made a welcome contribution to several fields—including Hispanic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Religious Studies, and History—in their English-language edition of *Vida*, the autobiography of Cistercian nun María Vela y Cueto (Ávila, 1561-1623). Accompanied by a selection of Vela's missives, Laningham and Tar's is the first complete English-language translation and edition of the autobiography, which Olegario González Hernández and Margaret Rees had edited in Spanish in 1961 and 2007, respectively. While Laningham and Tar recognize the value of the first English translation of the autobiography—Frances Parkinson Keyes's now out-of-print 1960 edition—the present study remedies the gaps left by this earlier translation, which was based on an incomplete transcribed copy of the manuscript (Laningham and Tar 49). *Vida* reconstructs a narrative of Vela y Cueto's religious career and conveys her unwavering spirituality, from the time she first dons the habit in 1576 to the years toward the end of her life.

Laningham prefaces the source text with an introduction of 48 pages and eight sub-sections in which she contextualizes Vela's life, detailing how the religious climate of Ávila, home to Teresa de Jesús and the elite background of Vela's family influenced her as an ascetic mystic. Particularly valuable is Laningham's contention that, more so than the Counter-Reformation, Spain's past as home to three main cultural groups (Christians, Muslims, and Jews) led to the widespread spark in Catholic fervor during Vela's lifetime; and, thus, her role as mystic. The editor also summarizes Vela's confrontation with the Holy Office of the Inquisition in 1603: a turning point in her life, which led to her reputation as miracle worker. Laningham explains how complementing the autobiography with private letters allows for a more complete reading of Vela's life. Indeed, as the scholar contends, the letters, addressed to Vela's family members, convey a self-assuredness and frankness that *Vida* does not. By contrast, Vela's knowledge that her work would be scrutinized by Church authorities clearly influenced

her autobiography, which follows rhetorical devices that were dictated by genre, in addition to omitting the complaints that Vela voices in her personal letters (3). Laningham asserts that, when read together, *Vida* and Vela's letters relay the story of a woman "engaged in a personal struggle to control her own fate by manipulating the environment in which she lived" (3).

In addition to this new, comparative approach to examining the nun's work, the present study is particularly valuable for its thorough annotations, which link *Vida* to examples of contemporaneous female spiritual writing, such as that of Teresa de Jesús and Ana de San Bartolomé. Indeed, the editor glosses the textual strategies through which these women ironically achieved authoritative agency and asserted their voices into male-dominated theological debates through purported rhetorical submission. The critical commentary is also valuable for contextualizing certain events in Vela's life by providing historical background and recovering the literary history of her writings.

Helpful, too, are the book's final appendices. These include a timeline of Vela's life and two excerpts from Miguel González Vaquero's 1618 account of Vela's life, *La muger fuerte*, prefaced with critical commentary. While the reader might glean that these particular excerpts were chosen to support the argument that Vela aimed to assert her voice into exclusive theological conversations, perhaps a clearer explanation of why those two excerpts were included in the study would have been helpful. Additionally, while the editors situate Vela within the context of Ávila and her writings within the context of sixteenth-century women's spiritual writing, perhaps an additional mention of *conversa* Teresa de Cartagena could have provided a more complete overview of the genre. Additionally, including the fifteenth-century nun might have also nicely paralleled the edition's harkening to Medieval Iberia and supported Laningham's argument regarding Spain's multicultural past's influence on early modern Spanish religious fervor.

Future scholarly work on the figure and writings of Vela y Cueto will benefit this informative English edition, which will also surely help promote the study of the figure of Vela y Cueto in multiple disciplinary contexts and encourage increased inclusion of these texts in courses on Golden Age literature in translation or on women's writing. This edition's completeness, modern presentation, and erudite commentary would make it a fitting companion to Teresa de Cartagena's *Arboleda de los enfermos* and Teresa de Jesús's *Libro de la vida* in more specialized courses on mysticism and women's

writings in the medieval and early modern periods. Finally, the book's list price of \$34.95 makes it an affordable option for course use.

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