Until very recently we knew little about the daily life of women in medieval and early modern Europe. Although in the past thirty years dozens of studies have provided relevant new information, our grasp of women’s history remains sketchy. One difficulty is that most of the documents from which specialists draw conclusions—moral treatises, legal documents, municipal and church records, literary pieces, and illustrations—were created by men, although more texts by women are emerging. Another is that researchers sometimes offer radically conflicting interpretations of the available data. For example, Robert Fossier argues that in spite of the misogyny of the clergy, women enjoyed exceptional power and freedom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries at all levels of society, whereas most other scholars conclude that women in fact lost ground owing to their increased numbers, which diminished their value, and to the hostility of the Church.¹ From the records on hand it appears that the feminization of Wisdom, the adoration of Mary, and even the identification of Jesus with motherhood did not translate into a positive attitude toward women, nor did the idealization of the lady in courtly and Neoplatonist literature.

Treatises from the late Middle Ages insist on women’s physical, moral, and spiritual weakness. The following text from the Liber Decem Capitulorum, by Marbod of Rennes (c. 1035–1123), is typical:

Countless are the traps which the scheming enemy has set throughout the world’s paths and plains; but among them the greatest—and the one scarcely anybody can evade—is woman. Woman the unhappy source, evil root, and corrupt offshoot,

¹. See Paulette L’Hermite-Leclercq’s discussion of the controversy in “The Feudal Order.”
who brings to birth every sort of outrage throughout the world... Her sex is envious, capricious, irascible, avaricious, as well as intemperate with drink and voracious in the stomach... Armed with these vices, woman subverts the world.

In a similar vein, Walter Map (1140–1209), archdeacon of Oxford, wrote to a friend: “The very best woman (who is rarer than the phoenix) cannot be loved without the bitterness of fear, anxiety, and frequent misfortune. Wicked women, however—who swarm so abundantly that no place is free from their wickedness—sting sharply when they are loved.” Andreas Capellanus, associated with the French court in the twelfth century, wrote in De Amore, “The female sex is... disposed to every evil. Every woman fearlessly commits every major sin in the world on a slender pretext.” Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, argued that women are “easily seduced, and determined seducers.” However, Gerson did admire certain outstanding women, among them the writer Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc.

Some scholars caution that this antifeminist material was generally written by celibate clergy, men who had a particular interest in demonizing what they had renounced. Yet it is an oversimplification to attribute medieval misogyny to sour grapes. Theologians had inherited a glut of writing that depicted woman as the daughter of Eve, the prototypical sinner who disobeyed God and brought disaster upon the human race. If woman suffered excruciating pain during childbirth and sometimes died of hemorrhages, this was the price she paid for her evil, libidinous nature. Only Mary, conceived without sin, was exempt from punishment. Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine supplied medieval writers with an arsenal of arguments to use against women. Classical sources provided misogynist views as well. Mythology provided the example of Pandora who, like Eve, unleashed evil on the human race. Aristotle taught that woman was an imperfect creature, the result of a flawed conception. Greek psychology held that the four elements (earth, fire, air, and water) were expressed in human beings as “humors” (black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm). Men, who shared the principles of earth and fire, were dry and hot; women, who shared the principles of air and water, were damp and cold, which made them flighty and phlegmatic. Furthermore, woman was thought to be controlled by her uterus, hysteria in Greek, and, therefore, by nature hysterical. Such views would continue to resonate in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and well into the early modern period.

Late medieval fiction reflects this bias. The Libro de los engaños e los sayamientos de las mujeres (1253) contains racy tales of wicked, wily women, although some critics believe the work reveals the anonymous author’s underlying admiration of them. Perhaps the most famous example is Le Roman de la Rose, by Jean de Meun (1240–1305), which was grafted onto Guil-

2. Blamires, Woman Defamed and Woman Defended, 100–101. The “scheming enemy” is the devil.
3. Map and Capellanus are quoted in Blamires, Woman Defamed and Woman Defended, 106 and 124, respectively. Some scholars believe that Capellanus is satirizing the extreme misogynists of his day, whereas others argue that this is what he really thinks. Blamires comments on the “strident misogyny” of the passage and concludes, “If a hoax, it has gone wrong” (116). Gerson is quoted in Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother, 136.
laume de Lorris’s earlier allegory about a lover’s quest for the “rose,” a symbol of female sexuality. Here, Genius describes woman as “a very irritable animal” and exhorts men to protect themselves from women “if you love your bodies and souls.” Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” includes a compendium of misogynist commonplaces. The bawdy stories in Boccaccio’s Decameron perpetuate the image of the libidinous, deceitful female, and his Il Corbaccio is a long diatribe against women.

The most famous example of misogyny in late medieval Spanish writing is El Corbacho, by Alfonso Martínez de Toledo, El Arcipreste de Talavera (1398–1470). The Arcipreste starts out by enumerating the evils that women cast on the world and how, for love of women, men break all the commandments. Then he discusses women’s countless flaws: They are deceitful, self-serving, arrogant, greedy, and selfish. They are gossips, hypocrites, and cheats. Furthermore, they are jealous, inconstant, disobedient, and dishonest. How are we to take this terrible

5. Blamires, Woman Defamed and Woman Defended, 163–64.
condemnation? At the end, the author implies that it was all a joke, repudiates his book (“conviene que al fuego e vivas llamas pongan el libro que compuse”), and concludes with a lament for those who are deprived of female company (“¡Ay del que duerme solo!”). But can this brief epilogue undo the pages of vitriol?6

Medieval writers also produced a limited number of responses to misogyny. Boccaccio wrote a catalogue of famous and admirable women, but his point is clearly that such women are the exception. A more convincing rebuttal is *Le Livre de la cité des dames* by Christine de Pizan (1365?–1430?), in which the author systematically demolishes conventional misogynist arguments. A number of treatises written in defense of women appeared in Spain during the fifteenth century, among them *El triunfo de las donas* (1443), by the Galician Juan Rodríguez de la Cámara, in which the author argues for the superiority of women; *El libro de las virtuosas y claras mujeres* (1446), by Álvaro de Luna, a conventional catalogue of heroines from antiquity; *Tratado en defensa de mujeres* (c. 1440), by Mosén Diego de Valera, in which the author attacks detractors of women; and *Jardin de las nobles doncellas* (1500), by Fray Martín Alonso de Córdoba, an argument in favor of the right of the Infanta Isabella to the throne of Castile and of queens and princesses to education.

It is not clear to what extent the theorists’ diatribe reflected real attitudes toward women. In medieval Spain, three cultures existed side by side—Christian, Moslem, and Jewish—but, especially in cities, the lives of women from the diverse groups seem not to have differed much from each other except in Andalusia, where the large concentrations of Moors ensured the imposition of Islamic laws and customs. The Moorish presence influenced family life and the roles of women in many parts of Spain, but particularly in the south, the Spanish upper classes kept their women secluded. Houses were built onto an interior patio so that women could not show themselves at the window. It was considered revolutionary when nobles began to build houses facing the street in sixteenth-century Seville. The use of the veil, or mantilla, was also a remnant of Arabic culture. But, J. H. Elliott remarks, “the strongest reminder of the Moorish past was to be found in the extreme inequality between the sexes, which was much greater than in contemporary northern Europe.” For example, market regulations in twelfth-century Seville specified that “women should be forbidden to do their washing in the gardens, for these are dens for fornication,” and that “women should not sit by the river bank in the summer if men appear there.” Many other rules designed to keep women out of public places and, in particular, to keep Moorish women away from Christians, indicate that women were afforded little leeway. In both Enrique de Villena’s social pyramid, published in Catalan in 1434, and its Islamized version, women are at the very bottom, under hermits (Villena) and idlers (Islamic version).7

The legal systems of the northern as well as the Mediterranean countries limited the

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7. For a discussion of women in the three cultures of medieval Spain, see Pastor, “Temática de las investigaciones sobre la historia de las mujeres medievales hispanas,” 11. Elliott discusses women in *Imperial Spain*, 305. Market regulations are quoted from Amt, *Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe*, 303. The social pyramid is reproduced in Harvey, *Islamic Spain*, 1250 to 1500, 93.
rights of women within both the family and the public sphere. Women were usually treated as wards of male family members—fathers, husbands, brothers, even sons. In the late medieval period, women throughout Europe acquired greater freedom to administer their own property, especially if they were single. In Spain, where Roman law and local laws called fueros prevailed, the behavior of women was strictly codified. However, Castilian law and custom did protect women’s inheritance rights. Although the codes limited the amount a bridegroom could give his bride to one-tenth of his own estate, sometimes she received as much as half the property in land and livestock. In Valencia a widow might expect to take half her husband’s estate. Even in Aragon, where Roman law and patria potestas (the power of the father) held great authority, a landholder could divide his property among both his daughters and sons. In the rest of Europe laws of primogeniture, which stipulated that only the eldest son could inherit, began to take hold in the late Middle Ages. However, in Spain women held on to their inheritance rights for a much longer period.  

In general, James Casey observes, marriage was considered a partnership between a man and a woman. However, this was not the case with respect to sexual matters, where the law was particularly rigid with respect to women. The Fuero juzgo, legal codes established by the Visigoths and still in force in early modern Spain, stipulated strict controls on women’s sexual conduct. A father who discovered his daughter having sexual relations in his house was entitled to kill both her and her lover. A widow, always suspect, was punished if she remarried within a year of her husband’s death, having to forfeit half her property to her children. But in cases of interethnic relations, the law came down harder on the man than the woman. If a Christian virgin slept with a Moor, she might lose half her property. If a married woman had sex with a Moor, she was to be turned over to her husband, who could either burn her to death or set her free. In either case the Moor was to be stoned to death. In contrast, a young bachelor was not only allowed but even expected to keep a barrangana, or mistress, until he was ready for marriage. The Fuero juzgo did offer protection against rape, condemning the rapist to servitude to his victim. Abduction could be punished by flogging, enslavement, or death, but in the frontier towns growing up in the wake of the Reconquest, abduction often went unpunished.  

A good source of information on the welfare of women is demographic data. However, although medieval censuses from Aragon exist, the first comprehensive survey of Castile was not made until 1534, making it difficult to draw conclusions about earlier periods. Demographic data for the rest of medieval Europe is also scanty. The available statistics indicate that between 1250 and 1500 women appear to have about the same life expectancy as men of the same social class and geographic location, except that the mortality rate of women of child-

8. See Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 270; Casey, Early Modern Spain: A Social History, 28; and Gies, Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages, 155.
9. On the marriage partnership, see Casey, Early Modern Spain, 28. On issues concerning widows and rape, see McKendrick, Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age, 16. The information on interethnic relations is from the Siete partidas, cited by Amt, Women’s Lives in Medieval Europe, 70. On the sexual conduct of bachelors, see Gies, Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages, 154.
bearing age (twenty to forty) is much higher than for males. On the other hand, women who survived childbirth generally lived longer than their male contemporaries.10

Around the thirteenth century the Church began to impose the “Christian model” of marriage—a long-term monogamous relationship into which both parties entered freely. In reality, however, in all of Europe, including Spain, matrimony was primarily a means of acquiring or maintaining power and property. Young men and women alike were subject to the will of their elders, who married them off to the benefit of the family, sometimes while they were still children. Women who resisted marriage were often subject to corporal punishment by their male relatives, a practice that continued well into the early modern period, as the text of Ana de San Bartolomé shows. Those who married against their parents’ wishes were punished as well. They could be disinherited, and their nuptials were considered invalid.

The Church and the law gave husbands almost unlimited power over their wives, but court records from thirteenth-century France show that women sometimes brought their husbands to court for excessive brutality, requesting separation or even divorce. This, concludes Claudia Opitz, “shows that women did not bow to the yoke of marriage as willingly as theologians and moralists could have wished.” Although patriarchal power could be extremely oppressive, “the absolute power of husbands, stressed again and again by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities, was more the ideal of a male-dominated society than a reality.” Still, men enjoyed considerably more freedom than women. Although the Church authorized sexual activity exclusively within marriage, men and women were not held to the same norms. The main purpose of marriage was to produce legitimate heirs. Therefore, female sexuality had to be controlled, and a woman’s body had to be reserved for her husband. Married women were closely supervised. Virginity was of primary importance for unmarried girls, who were sometimes kept in convents to ensure their purity. Even widows of marriageable age were subject to familial oversight. In Spain, an adulterous husband was not punished, but the Fuero juzgo did not even allow a wife charged with infidelity to counter her husband’s allegation by accusing him of the same crime. On the other hand, a wronged husband could put his wife and her lover to death, upon which he was awarded his wife’s dowry and her lover’s possessions. Lower-class women enjoyed more sexual liberty than their upper-class sisters had, however, and, especially in rural areas, premarital relations between engaged couples were accepted as normal, provided the pair eventually wed.11

If upper-class women had less sexual latitude than peasants, some gained considerable economic power through marriage or inheritance. They had control over their own money, jewelry, clothing, and the other goods that made up their dowry, as well as over products produced on their property. They could enter into business dealings and manage their own estates, sometimes assisted by stewards. It was not uncommon for aristocratic couples to keep separate households, and noblewomen ruled their own domains with substantial independence and control over servants and serfs. Often noblemen had to be away from their estates

11. The quotes are from Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 276. See also McKendrick, Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age, 15–16.
in service to the king, and their wives oversaw their domains as well, ruling with considerable autonomy. This authority “brought to the life of a married woman in the highest circles of medieval society a unique and potentially tension-laden combination of independence and subjugation.” Certainly, one of the best examples of female toughness among the aristocracy is Isabella of Castile, who audaciously allowed herself to be crowned on December 13, 1474, without her husband. “Ferdinand was stunned,” writes Nancy Rubin. “He had not expected that Isabella would be crowned without him or that the unsheathed sword, that ancient symbol of the highest sovereign authority, would be raised aloft for a female monarch.” Isabella went on to assume very specific powers and to rule alongside her husband—but not without causing considerable strain on the marriage.12

Because marriage was primarily a political and economic arrangement, love was not considered an essential factor, although sometimes an aristocratic couple did fall in love. A nobleman’s erotic desire could be directed, according to the conventions of courtly love, to an inaccessible lady, and serving girls or peasants could gratify his sexual needs. Women of the aristocracy with absent or inattentive husbands sometimes found ways of carrying on discreet affairs. In fact, the twelfth century has been called “a golden age of adultery.” The lais13 of the twelfth-century poet Marie de France are full of ribald stories of noblewomen and their lovers. Women troubadours called trobairitz in Provençal wrote frankly of their amorous desires, as this fragment by Tibors clearly shows:

Sweet handsome friend, I can tell you truly
that I’ve never been without desire
since it pleased you that I have you as my courtly lover.14

In Spain, Queen Juana, wife of Enrique IV and mother of “La Beltraneja,” was suspected of having an affair with the dashing Beltrán de la Cueva, of whom her husband reputedly was also enamored. The daughter of Juana la Loca is rumored to have had relations with Saint Ignatius of Loyola before his conversion.

Middle-class urban women also enjoyed considerable economic power. A wife of the burgeoning bourgeoisie might be in charge of the household budget and of the family’s servants and retainers as well. Many of these women participated actively in family businesses and worked for money. Women could be professional spinners, weavers, or embroiderers. They could also be bakers, butchers, poulterers, professional cooks, or merchants, selling foodstuffs, wine, beer, ale, and myriad other products. Christian and Jewish craftswomen of all types thrived throughout Europe. Madeleine Cosman points out that many English last names refer to craftswomen, such as Baxter (female baker), Webster (female weaver), and Brewster (female

12. The quote is from Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” 280. The quote on Queen Isabella is from Rubin, Isabella of Castile: The First Renaissance Queen, 128.
brewer). Not only could artisan-class women be an important economic asset to their families, but their work also gave them a certain mobility forbidden to their aristocratic sisters. In cities married women labored in the trades and crafts alongside their husbands, although some married women practiced their crafts independently of the family, as did many single women. If the wife of a craftsman was widowed, it was not unusual for her to continue her husband’s business. Craftswomen enjoyed certain legal protections in most parts of Europe. They controlled their own cash boxes and could train apprentices, both male and female. Some craft guilds had women members, and a few guilds were exclusively female.¹⁵

In the Middle Ages women excelled in the medical professions. They were pharmacists, healers, doctors, and surgeons. Some women physicians even operated on soldiers on the battlefield. Women doctors served both female and male patients. Some were licensed practitioners. “Depending on the century and the city, medical surgical licenses were granted to men and women by town authorities, by medical guilds, by university faculties, by the country’s king, or by a powerful churchman such as a bishop.”¹⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German mystic, poet, and musician, wrote medical treatises and was such a successful healer that people considered her cures miraculous. Women dominated the fields of obstetrics and gynecology. Some were midwives who apprenticed with other women, but some had formal medical training.

The eleventh-century physician and teacher Trotula of Salerno, reputedly a woman, wrote a text on gynecology and obstetrics that was greatly admired by the celebrated Spanish erudite Pedro Hispano, who later became Pope Juan XXI. Trotula’s reputation endured for hundreds of years. Disciples praised this doctor as a great woman physician and borrowed heavily from Trotula’s writings. In 1544 John Scottus reprinted Trotula’s Gynecology, introducing its author as a great and learned woman. However, by the early modern period, scholars began to doubt whether or not Trotula had ever existed, and if so, whether this personage was really a woman. In 2001 Monica Green argued that Trotula’s treatise is actually a collection of three separate works, each by a different author.¹⁷

Of course, the main task of women of all classes was to produce children. Families were large and infertility was viewed as a curse. Maternity and childbirth were considered purely women’s affairs in which men had little say. Opitz writes that “medieval matrons and midwives who concerned themselves with such matters knew far less about them, and the closely related questions of fertility and contraception, than is often assumed nowadays.”¹⁸ Consequently, many women died during their first pregnancy. Although society placed a premium on children, women tried to terminate pregnancies for a number of reasons, usually because they were unmarried or too poor to raise a child. But abortion was always risky, and often fa-

¹⁵. See Cosman, Women at Work in Medieval Europe, 75–102, and the introduction to Green’s edition of The Trotula.
¹⁶. Cosman, Women at Work in Medieval Europe, 36.
¹⁷. See Cosman, Women at Work in Medieval Europe, 43–45, and the introduction to Green’s edition of The Trotula.
tal, which is why women sometimes resorted to infanticide. Although the penalties were severe, the practice is thought to have been fairly common. Infanticide was a hard crime to prove because the mother could always claim that a child’s death was accidental.

Perhaps the area in which women exercised the greatest leadership was religious life. Convents started appearing on the European continent in the sixth century, but it was not until the late Middle Ages that they proliferated in great number. The spreading practice of primogeniture created increasing numbers of upper-class women who would not inherit or receive a marriage dowry. For them, the convent provided a refuge. In addition, the spiritual renewal movements of the late Middle Ages (discussed in the introduction to “Teresa de Jesús”) created a desire in many women to devote themselves entirely to God. Ronald Surtz stresses that it would be an error to view the medieval convent as simply “a prison for unwanted females,” for many nuns “evidence true vocations and what we would now call a positive self-image.”

Late medieval society generally held nuns and other religious women in high esteem, and certain anchoresses, such as Julian of Norwich, were consulted by the local population on all kinds of matters. (But it is also true that many convents had a reputation for moral laxity, and bawdy sisters were a topic in satirical literature, as, for example, in Boccaccio’s *Decameron.*

The convent often offered women more freedom and opportunities than other forms of life. Abbesses and prioresses sometimes exercised extraordinary control over their religious communities, attending to administrative affairs, managing the finances, and disciplining their nuns. Surtz notes that the abbess of the Cistercian convent of Las Huelgas “enjoyed quasi-episcopal jurisdiction over the towns and churches subject to her monastery. She could confer benefices, establish new parishes, hear matrimonial and criminal cases, approve confessors, and issue licenses to priests to say Mass in her churches.” She even heard the confessions of her own nuns, although Innocent III put a stop to this practice with a papal bull in 1200.

Medieval women of the nobility were sometimes educated to a high degree. In fact, because in many areas education was considered effeminate, they often received better schooling than men. Most girls, like most boys, were educated in monastic schools, although many children of the aristocracy had private tutors. Although girls and boys sometimes studied together in the same schools, ordinances usually prohibited teachers from instructing students of the opposite sex. In most cases, the convent offered women the best opportunities for education. Joan Ferrante notes that “by the twelfth century, many regular women’s convents had acquired reputations for learning and for the production of manuscripts, although that practice had begun much earlier.” The art of book copying and illuminating flourished for more than two centuries in the great houses of the female religious. However, by the thirteenth century,

19. Anchorites and anchoresses were men and women dedicated to a life of solitude, prayer, fasting, and penance. They often lived in cells attached to a church sanctuary, receiving the Eucharist through a window. Some devoted themselves to writing, making clothing for the poor, and offering spiritual advice through a veiled window. They were not allowed to leave their dwellings. The quote is from Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain,* 18.


universities were replacing religious houses as centers of higher education. Because females were barred from these institutions, women’s education declined at the end of the Middle Ages.

Not all nuns received the same education, even within a single convent. Some orders distinguished between “choir nuns,” who read and sang the Divine Office, and “lay sisters,” who performed menial tasks such as cooking or cleaning. This practice was still in force in the seventeenth century, when Ana de San Bartolomé lamented having to take the black veil of a choir nun. (See the introduction to “Ana de San Bartolomé.”) Choir nuns were given a more thorough education than lay sisters. Surtz suggests that in fifteenth-century Spain many nuns were probably phonetically literate in Latin (able to sound out words syllable by syllable) and comprehensively literate in Spanish (able to read silently, word by word). However, religious women were actually better educated than is apparent if we take into consideration literacy only. In the Middle Ages vast amounts of knowledge were transmitted orally; education was not limited to reading. Nuns gained familiarity with the Bible and other spiritual texts by hearing them read in the vernacular during meals and through quotation-laden sermons.

Religious life gave women a degree of authority they did not enjoy elsewhere. Although nuns did not have the benefit of intellectual authority conferred by advanced formal education, they did achieve spiritual authority through visionary experiences. In the Middle Ages, both male and female mystics claimed the authority of infused knowledge, that is, Wisdom instilled directly by God through visions and locutions. Women, especially, were thought to be susceptible to mystical experiences, and many female mystics were highly regarded. On the other hand, Church authorities were reluctant to give automatic credence to women’s claims to visionary experience because women were held to be deceitful and also vulnerable to hysteria and deception by the devil.

Not all female religious lived in convents. Founded in the Low Countries during the twelfth century, the Béguines were lay sisters who devoted themselves to communal living, prayer, and Christian service, especially in times of plague or epidemics. They took no vows, but lived in group houses called béguinages. They earned a living by spinning, weaving, or other crafts, or sometimes by teaching in girls’ or even boys’ schools.

Outside of the convent, most medieval women received no formal education. Neither men nor women of the lower classes were literate. Some upper-class ladies did receive instruction in Latin, the vernacular, and the other liberal arts, but many did not. The Catholic Queen Isabella of Castile learned her letters and numbers as a child, but little else. She read conventional “woman’s literature”—devotional books and lives of the saints—and also books of chivalry and the Libro de Buen Amor. Although her brothers were thoroughly schooled in the classics, Isabella learned to read and write only the Castilian vernacular. In addition, she learned prayers, the Bible, and needlecraft. “Despite Isabella’s royal birth and obvious intelligence, such neglect was not unusual,” writes Nancy Rubin. Isabella did not learn Latin until

she was relatively mature, perhaps under the tutelage of Beatriz Galindo, nicknamed “La Latina” because of her knowledge of that language. However, once in power Isabella actively supported women’s education at Court. Under the tutelage of Alessandro Geraldino, author of De eruditione nobelium puellarum\textsuperscript{24} (On the Education of Well-Born Girls), her daughters strove to become accomplished Latinists, and many of her ladies-in-waiting also studied the classics, poetry, mathematics, and literature. Some scholars think that, thanks to the encouragement of Isabella and her reform-minded confessor, Jiménez de Cisneros, literacy in Latin may also have increased in the convents. It was at Isabella’s behest that Antonio de Nebrija translated his Latin grammar into Spanish so that, as he explains in the preface, women could learn Latin without having to rely on male teachers.

**Early Modern Women: Renaissance or Retreat?**

Early modern Europe was gripped by the “woman question.” Was woman fully human? Did she have a soul? Was she capable of virtue? Could she be saved? Theologians and moralists debated these questions fiercely, some taking a distinctly feminist stance and others not. Constance Jordan, author of the seminal *Renaissance Feminism*, emphasizes that the debate cannot be understood in modern ideological terms, for the question was never cast, for early modern feminists, in the vocabulary of social equality. That is, it was never an issue of woman’s right to full political autonomy or to equal access to work. Women might be considered the spiritual equals of men, but they were their inferiors inside and outside the home.

Renaissance feminists of both sexes ignored “the most debilitating effect of woman’s supposed inferiority to man, that is, her poverty before the law.” Instead, they “sought to establish the truth that men and women were first and most importantly human beings.”\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, the humanness of women and that of the American aborigines were two of the great subjects of debate of the sixteenth century. Antifeminist writers, basing their arguments on natural law and Scripture, argued that women were not fully human but deficient versions of men. However, the scientific and biblical sources were ambiguous. Feminist writers, basing their opinions on many of the same sources as their opponents, concluded that there was no basis for assuming women incapable of virtue. Moralists such as Agrippa of Nettesheim, one of the most ardent feminists of the day, defended the intellectual and political achievements of women and argued that women differed from men only in body, not in spirit. In order to demonstrate women’s psychological parity with men, feminists chose as their model the virile woman, “virility” being defined not as masculinity in the sexual sense but as moral strength, resoluteness, and steadfastness. When Saint Teresa exhorts her spiritual daughters to be *varoniles*, she is calling on them to show firmness in their devotion to Christ and to the Reform.

Early modern feminists based their arguments on the notion that human nature was androgynous. A person was male or female, but men and women exhibited qualities commonly associated with both the masculine and the feminine. For example, forcefulness and rational-

\textsuperscript{24} Unfortunately, this text has been lost.

\textsuperscript{25} Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, 8.
ity were associated with the masculine, while mercy, patience, and temperance were associated with the feminine, but a good governor would exhibit all these qualities. On the one hand, the androgyny argument served to bolster the patriarchal order because those women judged admirable were those who displayed “virility.” On the other, it served to enhance the worth of women because pro-woman writers saw the qualities associated with femininity as beneficial to society as a whole. Concomitantly, they derided the kind of unbridled masculinity associated with bullies and tyrants as deleterious to the family and the state.26

The feminist theories of the sixteenth century had practical political application, for in 1553 Mary Tutor ascended to the throne of England and in 1588 Elizabeth I followed her. These events prompted thinkers to consider the legitimacy of gynecocracy, the rule of a woman over men. To John Knox, who puts forth his arguments in First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstruous Regiment of Women (1558), the very notion of a woman-headed government was an abomination, a violation of natural and divine law. However, for John Aylmer, author of Harborowe for Faithfull and Trew Subjectes (1559), the very fact that Elizabeth inherited the throne was proof that Providence supported her rule. If God did not provide a male heir, he argued, it was because for some mysterious purpose He intended a woman to rule England. Others remained unconvinced. Queen Isabella of Spain had ruled in conjunction with King Ferdinand, but Queen Elizabeth I had no husband and therefore was not subject to any man. How could a woman govern without a rational male to guide her? If the spirit was androgynous, argued the feminists, then certainly a woman could possess the necessary virility to rule effectively.

The “woman question” was resolved favorably for Elizabeth I, one of the most astute politicians of her day. But how did the feminist debates of the 1500s affect ordinary women? In 1977 the historian Joan Kelly-Gadol provoked a plethora of studies on early modern women by asking: Did women have a Renaissance?27 Kelly-Gadol proposed that the Renaissance—that period we associate with the flowering of European culture, with the expansion of Europe’s intellectual and artistic horizons—actually represented a diminution of power and opportunities for women through the increasing regulation of female sexuality, women’s diminishing economic and political roles, and new constraints on women’s cultural roles and access to education.

Courtly love had exalted the lady, creating a relationship of vassalage between lady and lover in which the woman occupied the role of feudal lord and the lover occupied the role of her siervo. It was a relationship entered into freely, with the knight accepting the demands of his lady as part of the agreement. She was in a position of power; he was in a position of servitude. If the ideal courtly liaison was chaste, in reality, such relationships often produced illegitimate children. However, legitimacy was less important than the stability of the arranged marriage, which guaranteed the social, political, and economic position of the family. In other words, the lord benefited from the courtly culture, which gave the lady a degree of sexual free-

26. See Jordan, Renaissance Feminism, 137.
dom (as long as she was discreet about her peccadilloes), but also guaranteed his own supremacy. Thus, although courtly love was in large part a literary convention, it reflected societal values. If marriage was primarily an economic and political arrangement, courtly love responded to the sexual and affective needs of the participants without undermining the interests of the aristocratic family.

Renaissance Neoplatonism introduced a new concept of love. If at first Neoplatonism retained the lady on her pedestal, in a position of inaccessibility, gradually the aloof beloved was replaced by the angelical wife. Marital harmony came to be seen as a reflection of divine Harmony and a goal to which secular men and women could legitimately aspire. Renaissance humanism made human beings the focus of intellectual inquiry. Theologians and other scholars examined every human institution, including the institution of marriage. By the 1520s, Martin Luther had intensified interest in the marriage issue by condemning clerical celibacy as unrealistic. The scrutiny to which marriage was subjected led to attempts to codify the conduct of secular women (subdivided according to their marital status into virgins, wives, and widows), strictly regulating their behavior (just as political treatises codified the behavior of princes and courtiers). The female conduct manuals of the sixteenth century were particularly concerned with women’s sexual behavior, the primary issue being the protection of chastity.

In 1521 Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540), a Spanish converso educated in Paris and Brussels and living at Oxford, began work on De institutione feminae Christianae (On the Education of a Christian Woman), commissioned by Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella and wife of Henry XVIII. Catherine had wanted to continue her mother’s tradition of educating women and so engaged one of Europe’s most respected intellectuals to produce a treatise for the instruction of her daughter Mary. In fact, De institutione reached a much wider audience, becoming popular with both Catholics and Protestants in England and finding broad favor in Spain as well. Written in Latin, it went through forty editions and was translated into English, Dutch, French, German, and Italian, as well as Spanish.

A pedagogue and progressive, Vives begins by stressing the importance of educating girls in the art of reading as well as in household management. However, his focus quickly shifts to his main concern: female sexuality. For Vives, “A woman’s only care is chastity; therefore when this has been thoroughly elucidated, she may be considered to have received sufficient instruction.” All of a woman’s education, in Vives’s view, must be directed toward preserving her purity.

In Part I, dedicated to the education of virgins, he cautions that little girls should be allowed to play only with other little girls so that they do not become “accustomed to find pleasure in the company of men.” They should not play with dolls, which are “a kind of image of idolatry,” but with miniature pots and pans, which will prepare them for housewifery. Vives believes that since women are flighty and their thoughts turn easily to vice, their minds must be kept occupied. Girls should learn to spin so that they will always be busy. They should learn to read, not to acquire a thorough education or to take pleasure in books, but rather to keep

their thoughts pure. Hence, they should read only devotional books, not romances that might unfetter their imaginations. In Vives’s view, evil in women is usually the product of ignorance of virtue. Therefore, the purpose of reading is to expose women to “holy counsels” that will purify their thoughts, thereby guaranteeing their chastity. Maidens must be kept away from amusements—jousts, parties, dances, banquets, and “elegantly dressed boys with their hair curled”—that may awaken lust. They should be taught simplicity, frugality, and modesty. Furthermore, they should avoid laughter, sensorial stimuli, and excesses of all sorts, so that their love may be directed exclusively to Christ. Maidens thus educated, says Vives, will bring great joy and tranquility to their future husbands.

In Part II, on married women, Vives (who was himself married) rejects the notion that the sole purpose of matrimony is procreation, stressing instead the importance of “community of life” and “companionship.” However, he soon turns his attention once again to chastity, arguing that a wife’s purity requires her husband’s constant vigilance. Marital harmony can only be attained when women obey their husbands and attend to their households. Men must discipline their wives, either verbally or physically, and women must submit to their husbands’ thrashings, keeping in mind that these are for their own good. The two great qualities for married women are “chastity and great love for one’s husband.” The latter dictates that women must be concerned with the family’s honor and therefore must avoid not only impropriety but also even the appearance of impropriety. If a woman is falsely accused by her husband, she should accept a beating anyway, profiting from the experience by remembering Christ’s suffering on the Cross. A woman should never ask her husband embarrassing questions, pry into his affairs, or insult him. A husband, in turn, owes his wife “paternal affection” and accepts the task of educating her regarding her duties. Literate women are a treasure, notes Vives, because they can instruct their children by reading them edifying stories that reinforce Christian values.

Part III, on widows, reinforces societal prejudices against unattached women. Widows were viewed as dangerously independent, crafty, immoral, and treacherous. As older women experienced in the pleasures of the flesh, they could easily misguide young girls, and so should be kept away from them. Although a widow’s years make her wise, Vives asserts that “in the weaker sex this unexpected wisdom is suspect.” Vives is as concerned about the widow’s chastity as he is about other women’s: “When she no longer has a husband, she should turn to the holy spouse of all women, Jesus Christ.” She should not seek a new mate, but should behave modestly, avoiding the company of men, especially priests and monks, who often lead women astray. If she does remarry, the ceremony should be “celebrated in silence, almost in secret, without fuss and dancing.” In short, the widow must withdraw as much as possible from the world, attracting no attention and living chastely.

Vives concludes by saying that he has no need to praise marriage, for its benefits are obvious. But in order for a marriage to be successful, it is essential that the wife be virtuous. While

Vives’s defense of women’s education and his view of marriage as a partnership place him solidly in the progressive camp, and his concern for the psychological development of women distinguishes him as a Renaissance humanist, his views reflect the misogyny of his time.

Charles Fantazzi suggests that Catherine of Aragon may have been displeased with Vives’s book because she soon requested another from Erasmus. When Erasmus’s *The Institution of Marriage* was published in Basel in 1526, Luther had wed just the year before, and men and women were abandoning their cloisters to marry in lands newly claimed by Protestantism. Erasmus himself argued that clerics unable to uphold their vow of celibacy be allowed “the remedy of marriage.”

Erasmus’s treatise is a kind of manual on how to achieve a successful marriage. Like Vives, Erasmus envisions matrimony as a partnership. He argues that a good marriage, in which the spouses treat each other with kindness and consideration, can lead to a life of tranquility for both. Rather than the paternalistic authoritarianism that Vives advocates, Erasmus counsels moderation and mutual understanding: “It seems advisable that a husband should bear with his wife, or a wife with her husband, since perhaps the one can correct the other, should they disagree somewhat on those doctrinal questions that are today a subject of controversy throughout the world.” Vives seems never to envision husbands and wives actually discussing matters of doctrine, whereas Erasmus views intellectual exchange as normal between spouses. In choosing a mate, Erasmus stresses the importance of virtue over social position. He praises the ability of the good wife to run a household effectively. He recognizes that men as well as women have flaws, and argues that both husband and wife must be willing to forgive. Like Vives, he stresses Reform values, disparaging pomp and finery, but he applies his admonitions to both sexes, counseling frugality and simple living for all. Still, even Erasmus is not free of misogyny. He notes that women must be kept busy with household chores because “unless a girl is given something to occupy her mind, her thoughts turn inevitably toward evil.” And like other moralists of his day, he defends masculine supremacy: “A husband may defer to his wife in the sense that he will sometimes swallow his pride, but he will never surrender his authority.” However, Erasmus stresses the role of affection in marriage much more than his contemporaries, arguing that if husband and wife truly love each other, they can triumph over any adversity. Traditionalists found Erasmus’s views too liberal or patently offensive. All of his works were banned in 1559 by the Index of Prohibited Books, and although the Council of Trent later cleared some of them, the *Institution of Marriage* remained on the list.

The growing threat of Protestantism in the sixteenth century made Catholic authorities aware of the need to confront some of the excesses that besmirched the image of the Church. The objective of the movement known as the Counter Reformation was in part to combat the abuses and inconsistencies that had given rise to the Lutheran rebellion in the first place by addressing head on awkward doctrinal, moral, and social issues. To this end Pope Paul III convened the Council of Trent (1545–63), a series of ecumenical assemblies in which dogma was

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32. See Fantazzi’s introduction to *The Education of a Christian Woman*, 15. The quote is from Rummel, *Erasmus on Women*, 80.
defined, scriptural interpretations were fixed, the duties of priests were more clearly codified, and doctrinal ambiguities were clarified. Among the issues the Church fathers addressed was marriage.

Of particular importance was the issue of clandestine marriages, a not uncommon occurrence that led to a host of social ills. Clandestine marriages, in which couples made their vows in private without parental consent, witnesses, or clergy, put women at a disadvantage. Men sometimes received sexual favors from women simply by avowing the couple was married, and then abandoned them. “Deflowered” women were repudiated by their families; they had little hope of finding mates and usually had to enter a convent. Although the Council of Trent reluctantly recognized existing clandestine marriages as long as they were contracted with the consent of both parties, the Canons and Decrees of the Council stated that in the future marriage could only be contracted in the presence of a pastor and two or three witnesses; if these criteria were not met, the marriage was invalid. The Church stance contributed to an increased appreciation of the lawful institution of Christian marriage.

However, nearly all Catholic moralists of the time viewed wedlock as inferior to celibacy. In his introduction to La perfecta casada (1583), Fray Luis de León writes:

Porque, a la verdad, aunque el estado del matrimonio, en grado y perfección, es menor que el de los continentes o vírgenes, pero por la necesidad que hay de él en el mundo para que se conserven los hombres y para que salgan de ellos los que nacen para ser hijos de Dios, y para honrar la tierra y alegrar el cielo con gloria, fue siempre muy honrado y privilegiado por el Espíritu Santo en las Letras Sagradas.35

That said, Fray Luis goes on to defend marriage: “El estado de los casados es estado noble y santo y muy preciado de Dios.”36 Like his predecessors, he asserts that in order for a marriage to be successful, the wife must submit to specific rules of conduct. She must excel at household management and be frugal. If a wife has servants, she must manage them prudently. The farmer’s wife must be industrious, even if she is rich. The merchant’s wife must know how to increase her husband’s assets. Wives should rise early and attend to their family and household duties; they should avoid idleness, for indolence leads to sinfulness. They should be pious and charitable, but they should avoid spending too much time in church, for houses of worship can be meeting places for gossips and insalubrious characters. A good wife stays close to home and away from public places. She reads inspirational books, not romances that might kindle impure thoughts. She dresses modestly, avoiding frills that might attract attention. She is unassuming, quiet, clean, cheerful, and obedient, and she teaches her children to be the same.

Although Fray Luis is as prescriptive as Vives, his attitude toward women is more positive. He believes women to be capable of excellence, and he dwells far less than Vives on women’s propensity for wickedness and the need to control them. He accepts as a given male superior-

34. Cervantes deals with this issue in Don Quijote, in the story of Fernando and Dorotea.  
35. Introducción, La perfecta casada, Obras completas castellanas I, 244.  
36. La perfecta casada, 246.
ity, but insists that the wise husband will treasure a good wife and will teach her, not through violence, but by his own example of good living: “El hombre, que es la cordura y el calor, y el seso y el maestro, y todo el buen empleo de la casa y familia, ha de haberse con su mujer como quiere que ella se haya con él, y enseñarla con ejemplo lo que ella haga.” 37 The image of marital bliss that Fray Luis paints in La perfecta casada met with immediate success among general audiences, and the book was reprinted five times in five years. Among serious critics, however, it was censured as frivolous for treating a theme unworthy of the attention of a cleric. Even today, many dismiss La perfecta casada as a “woman’s book,” although Fray Luis’s instructions are all based on Scripture.

By the end of the century, the notion of marriage as a partnership, albeit with one superior partner, had given way to a new era in which women were increasingly marginalized. Ruth El Saffar argues that the self-made man epitomized by Don Quijote could no longer have a relationship with a flesh-and-blood woman, but only with an imaginary, idealized Dulcinea. 38 This is perhaps an oversimplification of Cervantes’s position. While exalting the kind of self-determination Don Quijote incarnates, Cervantes undermines his character’s utopianism by constantly juxtaposing his idealistic vision with the realities of everyday existence. If the fantastical Dulcinea embodies Don Quijote’s utopian worldview, she contrasts with more realistic, complex, “flesh-and-blood” female characters who integrate both positive and negative qualities. Some of these (Dorotea, Zoraída) are active, strong-willed, and appealing characters, which suggests that Cervantes had a generally favorable view of women. At any rate, Cervantes does not dehumanize women either by placing them on a pedestal or by demonizing them, but instead shows them to be complex, contradictory, and fully human.

Furthermore, Cervantes expresses fairly optimistic views on marriage in Don Quijote: “El de casarse los enamorados [es] el fin de más excelencia.” Although Cervantes repeats many of the commonplaces advanced by humanists of earlier generations—the merit of virtue over wealth, the importance of female decorum and modesty, the need for husbands to instruct and guide their wives—he breaks with tradition by repudiating the notion that women require constant surveillance, arguing that marital happiness must be built on mutual trust. Men should not be suspicious, assuming automatically that their wives are up to mischief, but give them the benefit of the doubt: “Opinión fue de no sé qué sabio que no había en el mundo sino una sola mujer buena, y daba por consejo que cada uno pensase y creyese que aquella sola buena era la suya, y así viviría contento.” 39 This, of course, is the moral of the novela intercalada, “El curioso impertinente.” It is true, as El Saffar argues, that Don Quijote himself has no healthy, intimate relationships with women, but this is because Don Quijote rejects the imperfect, ever-shifting, quotidian reality that constitutes the circumstances in which human beings find themselves. After all, Don Quijote is a questionable hero. 40

Still, women do become increasingly marginalized in the seventeenth century, and the

37. La perfecta casada, 271.
38. See “Literary Reflections on the ‘New Man’: Changes in Consciousness in Early Modern Europe.”
39. Quotes are from Don Quijote II, 189.
40. See Don Quijote, Hero or Fool?
new sense of self-determination embodied by Don Quijote does have something to do with it. The rupture between culture and nature, and the new cerebralism that will culminate in the Cartesian revolution, create an environment in which man sees himself in control of his universe—a universe dominated by mental and physical prowess—in which woman is little more than a pawn. In his Examen de ingenios, completed in the late sixteenth century sometime before 1574, Juan Huarte de San Juan advances the notion of the undeniable inferiority of the female sex. He counsels parents to try to have male children, not because females are evil but because they are stupid. Basing his arguments on the theory of humors, he says that women, because of the coldness and moistness of their composition, “no pueden alcanzar ingenio profundo.” Women may sometimes seem intelligent, says Huarte, but they are only parroting what they have heard: “Sólo vemos que hablan con alguna apariencia de habilidad en materias livianas y fáciles, con términos comunes y muy estudiados.” Thus, women are simply victims of their biological makeup, which makes them poorly suited for intellectual endeavors.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, familial life was privileged over celibate life in Protestant countries. In Catholic countries, moralists were grappling with questions left unanswered by the Council of Trent. For example, the Canons and Decrees was vague on the issue of adultery, specifying only that women who live with adulterers “shall be punished severely in accordance with their guilt by the local ordinaries.” In Spain, the honor code dictated that any nobleman who even suspected his wife, sister, or daughter of adultery, whether or not she was actually guilty, had not only the right but also the duty to kill her. The proper punishment for adulterous women was the subject of endless dispute among theologians.

Honor became the motivating issue in countless Golden Age plays, provoking modern critics to debate whether or not honor actually functioned in society as it was depicted on the seventeenth-century stage. Writing in the 1960s and ’70s, scholars such as Alexander Parker and Peter Dunn saw an intrinsic condemnation of the honor code, and therefore a social message, in the plays of Calderón. In contrast, C. O. Jones argued that honor was simply a dramatic device, and that the honor plays did not necessarily reflect reality. Although the obsession with honor and the resulting uxoricide on the Spanish stage may not mirror how Spaniards actually lived, it is certainly safe to say that female chastity was a real concern during this period and that an avenging husband had the law on his side. In 1552 Antonio Torquemada wrote that if a woman committed adultery, “las leyes no mandan sino que se entregue y ponga en poder del marido para que haga della su voluntad.” Daniel Heiple offers several examples to demonstrate that the law “specifically allowed the husband to kill with impunity the wife and her lover on his own authority.” Likewise, Georgina Dopico Black provides evidence that “there is no question that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century civil law afforded husbands ample freedom in the disposal of adulterous wives.” Although we cannot know for certain how

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41. Huarte de San Juan, Examen de ingenios, 627.
42. Canons and Decrees, 189.
often the adultery laws were applied, honor was a psychological reality for early modern Spanish men. No blemish on the virtue of a woman could be tolerated. Even in cases of rape, it was the woman and her family who were dishonored, not the perpetrator of the crime. Wealthy rape victims might sometimes have recourse to the law, but most women could not afford to bring their violators to justice. Once “tarnished,” the rape victim was usually no longer considered marriagable and so had no option but the convent, although there are records of certain men who married rape victims out of charity.

Innumerable plays and stories, including María de Zayas’s “La inocencia castigada,” reflect the Spaniard’s obsessive preoccupation with sexual honor, which Black has related to that other Spanish fixation, limpieza de sangre. Because a wife’s adultery threatened to “contaminate” the lineage, her husband’s brutality was deemed justified. The honor code epitomizes male objectification of the female body. The husband controlled every aspect of that body’s behavior. He could use it to provide sexual gratification and offspring, and he could destroy it if he deemed it tainted. The regulation of female behavior led men to involve themselves with issues that had previously been considered exclusively women’s—for example, nursing. Ruth El Saffar remarks: “Female agency, even in such areas as childbirth and breastfeeding that should be considered the exclusive domain of the feminine, diminished alarmingly in Western culture with the rise of cities and technology.” Theologians, moralists, and male physicians weighed in on the issue of breastfeeding, most of them defending the practice. Juan Luis Vives enthusiastically endorsed mother’s milk in his Education of a Christian Woman. However, noblemen often objected to breastfeeding because they found the practice inelegant. If a husband decided to employ a wet nurse, he himself chose her, taking care that she be of old Christian stock so that the baby would not be contaminated with impure milk. Upper-class women tended to have more children than their poorer sisters owing to the custom among the nobility of using wet nurses. Lower-class women nursed their own babies and thus were prevented from conceiving again immediately by the process of lactation.

In Spain as elsewhere, the transition from feudal to mercantile economies was marked by the growth of cities. Philip II had established Madrid as the seat of government, but it was not until 1606 that Philip III made the city officially the capital. Madrid grew vertiginously, its population quintupling in half a century. People came from all parts of Spain and from foreign countries to find work. Ciudadanos (guild masters, merchants, and small businessmen) were increasingly considered the backbone of society. Noble blood and titles still carried tremendous weight, but urbanization brought about a new social mobility as fortunes were made through commerce and trade. The aristocracy participated increasingly in these activities (as illustrated, for example, in the stories of Carvajal), and sometimes married into wealthy merchant-class families.

44. Torquemada is quoted in Vigil, La vida de las mujeres en los siglos XVI y XVII, 153. The quotes are from Heiple, “The Theological Context of Wife Murder in Seventeenth-Century Spain,” 109, and Black, Perfect Wives, Other Women, 114. See also Mujica, “The Rapist and His Victim.”
45. El Saffar, Rapture Encaged, 3. See also King, Women of the Renaissance, 12–17, and Vigil, Vida de las mujeres, 135.
46. See Casey, Early Modern Spain, 120.
This changing environment offered women ways to rebel against male authority. Although most women probably lived in relative seclusion, urbanization afforded opportunities for women to go out—to the theater, to social gatherings, to paseos in the park. Foreign travelers often commented on the brazenness of Spanish women. “They enjoy great freedom,” wrote an Italian priest in 1595. “They walk about the streets, by day and by night, as men do. One can easily talk to them and they are quick to answer back. But they have so much liberty that they often exceed the bounds of modesty and the limits of respectability.” Although the vast majority of women probably left their homes rarely except to perform religious duties or to visit relatives, foreigners “were almost unanimous in their denunciation of the bold and often provocative behavior of Spanish women.”

Moralists denounced women’s saucy behavior, but they also lamented the degeneration of Spanish society in general. By the end of the sixteenth century, Spain was in economic and political decline. The Jesuit priest Juan de Mariana (1536–1623), author of the widely read Historia general de España, laments that “en este tiempo mucho se han acrecentado así los vicios como las virtudes”. Men have become effeminate, he says, “por la disimulación de los príncipes y por la licencia y libertad del vulgo, muchos viven desenfrenados sin poner fin ni tasa ni a la lujuria, ni a los gastos, ni a los arreos y galas” (Libro I, Cap. VI). Gender roles seemed to be blurring, with men wearing frilly ruffs like women. Susan Paun de García has argued that if María de Zayas urged women to be “manly,” it was because men no longer were.

The increasing regulation of women’s behavior was exacerbated by economic developments that diminished women’s financial power. By the early sixteenth century, concern for the conservation of the patrimony led to the spread and strengthening of primogeniture laws. Squabbling among nobles over matters of inheritance had sometimes led to serious conflicts. In order to ensure orderly succession and to preserve the economic assets of the great noble houses, Ferdinand the Catholic encouraged the observance of mayorazgo at the Cortes de Toro in 1505. The practice had been used irregularly before, but in the early sixteenth century it became the norm. Spanish women could still inherit, but often their inheritance came in the form of a dowry, that is, in liquid assets rather than land. Casey notes that “the dowry reflected an urbanising economy, where money was more abundant and where it was used to promote the social mobility of families.” The expansion of primogeniture laws affected women adversely by robbing them of their right to inherit land, thereby decreasing their power and prestige. The growing importance of dowries made it more and more difficult to marry off daughters. Some families could afford to marry off only the eldest daughter and perhaps the second. The remaining female progeny entered the convent, which required a much smaller dowry.

In all social classes women became a potential financial burden for their families. The six-

47. The Italian priest is quoted by Defourneaux, Daily Life in Spain in the Golden Age, 145; the second quote is found on p. 146.
48. The quote by Mariana is from Historiae de rebus Hispaniae (Historia general de España). See Paun de Garcia, “Zayas’s Ideal of the Masculine: Clothes Make the Man.”
49. Casey, Early Modern Spain, 200.
teenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of great instability in Europe, and even wealthy families suffered from economic anxiety, for fortunes were sometimes lost overnight through wars, epidemics, or natural disasters. If the family had land, it went to the eldest male child; when he married, his wife’s property would be added to his. A woman, on the other hand, required a dowry to marry, and if she had inherited land, it would typically pass to her husband. In Spain, it was particularly difficult to find a suitable husband for a young woman, since so many men went to the New World or to war in Flanders or elsewhere. Stiff competition for husbands resulted in inflated dowries. The financial concerns that permeate the stories of Mariana de Carvajal reflect this situation. The primogeniture system put second- and third-born sons at a disadvantage as well, although men had work options closed to women. In countries in which there was no primogeniture, the situation was also difficult for men, because paternal property sometimes had to be divided into very small tracts in order to accommodate all the sons.

Aside from nuns, single women had no place in Catholic society. In the Protestant North women did sometimes remain single and widows sometimes chose not to remarry, but in Spain and Italy marriage and the convent were the usual options. Thus, female offspring represented a double burden for their fathers, who not only had to keep them chaste, but also had to provide them with a dowry.

Not every woman wanted to marry, however, because marriage entailed peril. Producing and raising children were the main occupations of married women, and, in fact, Luther maintained that these were the sole reasons women even existed. Expectant mothers were celebrated, and in Spain, a cult developed around pregnancy, especially among the aristocracy. The household catered to the whims of the mother-to-be, indulging her cravings and moods. But in all social classes, childbirth was risky. Estimates of death in childbirth in England in the late Renaissance range from 2.5 to 10 percent, at least five or six times greater than the figures for the nineteenth century. Infant mortality was extremely high. Many children succumbed to influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis, malnutrition, or the plague. Others died in accidents, and still others at the hands of their own mothers. Sometimes wet nurses abused children. In Europe, including Spain, only from 20 to 50 percent of children lived to adolescence. Casey notes that between 40 and 50 percent of the children born in the parishes of Valencia in the seventeenth century survived. From a fifth to a third of newborns were expected to die during their first year. Among foundlings, the figures were even more appalling. It was not uncommon for a mother to abandon her child. Many hospitals and convents cared for foundlings, most of which were girls, since female children were less desirable than males. In these institutions boys learned to read and write and girls to cook and sew. Sometimes the institution would provide a dowry so that a female foundling could eventually marry. Sometimes abandoned children—especially the illegitimate offspring of mistresses of noblemen—would be taken in by wealthy families where they would work as servants. In the fifteenth century it was not unusual in some parts of Europe for the lover and the

50. See King, Women, 3–6; Vigil, Vida de las mujeres, 129; Casey, Early Modern Spain, 31.
children of the son of a nobleman to live in his home with his parents, but the Protestant Reformation and the Counter Reformation put a stop to this practice.

As in the Middle Ages, women worked. In rural areas, women assisted in farm chores. Often women worked their husband’s or father’s property, but sometimes they hired themselves out as farm workers. In this case, they earned about half as much as male workers. Rural women also excelled in brewing wine, making cheese, and spinning cloth. Upper-class women engaged in farm work at the managerial level if their husbands were away, continuing the medieval tradition.

In urban areas, women worked in the home spinning, sorting linen, making clothing, and preparing and preserving food. In the artisan and merchant classes, city women also worked as butchers, chandlers, shoemakers, silk weavers, embroiderers, lace makers, and smiths. Some were highly skilled artisans. They worked independently or with their husbands in teams. Few girls were formally apprenticed, but many learned skills in family businesses, in domestic service, or in training schools. However, women were usually excluded from the guilds that gave craftsmen public recognition. “Guildmen and city councils jealously restricted rights to the immediate female relatives of masters and workers. Daughters of leather belt makers could continue the trade taught to them by their fathers after they married, but were forbidden to teach the craft to apprentices or even to their husbands.” Sometimes, however, women found ways to circumvent these regulations. Knowing a craft and carrying out business independently gave women prestige, power, and wealth. On the other hand, women who worked as day laborers in a home or a shop remained in a state of dependency and received little respect.

Women had always been active in the production of textile and garments, but “the level at which they were permitted to participate shifted downwards as cloth production became increasingly organized and taken over by male supervisors and workers.” As skilled work became the province of male-exclusive guilds of weavers and cloth-cutters, women were relegated to less prestigious tasks. Throughout Europe, economic modernization gradually diminished the number of family workshops, and new legal restrictions prevented women from owning property or benefiting from guild association. In Spain, there often was not enough work for artisans and, as a result, guild membership became more and more restrictive, often becoming limited to the sons of guildsmen.

Women had been professional healers since the Middle Ages, but by the sixteenth century their medical competence became suspect. Most women learned their craft through apprenticeship and experience, but as medicine became increasingly professionalized, women were gradually excluded, at least in large cities. In rural areas midwives continued to deliver babies, much as they had since biblical times. In urban areas, obstetrics (or midwifery), which had always been a woman’s field, came to be considered a medical specialization, and, as such, was

51. King, Women, 63.
52. King, Women, 67.
53. The quote is from King, Women, 67. See also Casey, Early Modern Spain, 123. For further discussion of female participation in guilds, see Vicente, “Images and Realities of Work.”
reserved for university-educated male physicians. A course of study for midwives was developed in Paris in the mid-sixteenth century and, although similar programs were imitated in other European cities, female obstetricians were unable to resist the male takeover of their profession. Even when women were allowed to attend births, they were supposed to work under the supervision of a male physician.

But one profession from which women could not be excluded was the oldest of all: prostitution. Mary Elizabeth Perry shows that in Seville the municipal fathers actually encouraged prostitution, which they exploited commercially and politically in order to bolster their own authority. Prostitution had always existed in Seville, but in the early sixteenth century several factors contributed to its expansion. An influx of cash from the Americas made Seville a boombown, but also contributed to a decline in local industries, for merchants found it more profitable to ship foreign-made than domestic goods to the New World. As a result, many small businesses foundered. At the same time, government monetary policies resulted in decreased buying power for the masses. Marriage and even convent dowries were too expensive for many families, and women found themselves on the street. The combination of abundant new money and widespread poverty made the city ripe for a growth in prostitution. Brothels not only provided work for indigent women but also supported a network of pimps, innkeepers, and underworld characters. Furthermore, prostitution enabled the city fathers to unite the people against the specter of immorality, which increased their own influence. Licensed brothels, where prostitutes were subjected to medical examinations, helped to control the spread of syphilis, and brothel administration became a moneymaking venture for the city. Prostitution was tolerated in all the great cities of Europe, and in Italy, the cortigiana onesta, or high-class prostitute who catered to only one nobleman at a time, was greatly respected.

As in the Middle Ages, education in the early modern period was generally reserved for the upper classes. In the lower classes, neither men nor women received formal education. Even among the aristocracy, women's education consisted mainly of spinning, needlework, and skills needed to uphold the domestic economy. Only a small percentage of women learned to read and write in fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century Europe. Yet, upper-class women sometimes did receive thorough humanistic educations, usually from fathers or gifted tutors, and a fraction wrote, producing fiction, poetry, drama, autobiography, and moral or spiritual treatises.

For early modern women—and sometimes for men, as well—scholarship and marriage were considered incompatible.54 Intellectually promising girls of noble families were encouraged to pursue their studies until marriage, at which time they put their books away. The mother of María de San Alberto and Cecilia del Nacimiento, Carmelite nuns whose work is included here, was a highly exceptional woman who did continue to pursue knowledge after marriage, but such cases were rare. Margaret King notes, “A young woman was free to be studious. There were no other demands made of her, and the period of adolescence for those with

54. For example, Galileo never married, although he maintained a long-term relationship with a woman and produced three illegitimate children, because university professors were expected to remain single. See Dava Sobel, Galileo’s Daughter, 24.
literary interests was a period of freedom. But that freedom could not last into adulthood.” Most secular women writers who achieved recognition did so for works produced in their youth. Writers such as Mariana de Carvajal, who pursued a literary career after she was widowed, constituted a tiny minority.

Women who wrote were plagued with doubts about their ability. It was customary for writers, male and female, to begin their works by asking pardon for their shortcomings—a rhetorical strategy known as *mediocritas* that was used to ingratiate artists to their patrons. However, the self-abasement practiced by women writers exceeds formal requirements; these women seem to feel guilty about their literary abilities. King notes that Isotta Nogarola, who produced what is arguably the most important work written by a woman of the Italian Renaissance, “apologizes not only for being a woman with pretenses of learning but for being a woman at all.” Most writing women married and abandoned the intellectual life or else withdrew from secular studies and turned to the sacred, retreating to “the cloisters of their minds.” They studied in solitude, in “self-constructed prisons, lined with books.”

In spite of the restrictions he placed on women’s reading, Juan Luis Vives did include in his list of recommended books for women some in Latin, which opened horizons for the serious education of women. In general, though, women learned to read only in the vernacular. In Italy, some girls went to schools where they learned reading (in the vernacular only) and arithmetic. King notes that about one-tenth of schoolchildren were girls. From the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, women joined the ranks of men in the teaching profession in order to avoid girls’ having to study with males.

In Protestant countries, Luther’s insistence that all Christians read Scripture (in the vernacular, if necessary) brought about a temporary surge in female literacy. Elementary (but not secondary) schools were established for girls in several Protestant cities, but students learned only enough to enable them to fulfill their religious and domestic duties. Furthermore, Protestantism deprived women of the female role models provided by Church culture, including the Virgin and countless female saints known for their piety and learning. Frances E. Dolan notes that the Reformation was “a mixed bag for women.” Although they benefited in the beginning from reformist ideas, they “lost the convent as an alternative to marriage, and lost as well female objects of worship and a visual culture rich in positive images of femininity.”

Spain was among the countries that excelled in female education, thanks in part to the legacy of Queen Isabella I of Castile. By the seventeenth century the peninsula was producing highly literate female aristocrats, some of whom read both Spanish and Latin. Spanish women were held to be the most learned in Europe. In 1620 F. A. della Chiesa wrote, “Today in Spain,

more than in any other part of Christendom, women are devoted to letters.”58 But although women were encouraged to read, they were not encouraged to write, at least not for publication; writing for publication was considered a male occupation. The small number of extant texts by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish women is surely deceiving. It is probable that scores of early modern Spanish women wrote in the courts and great houses of Spain, and even more extensively in the convents. However, their works were not published or conserved.

Convent Life

Catholic culture allowed women to aspire to greatness. Chastity was considered the purest state for both men and women, for self-denial was viewed as a virtue and concupiscence as a sin. Even moralists who defended marriage agreed that virginity was the most wholesome condition for a woman. Women “could not normally achieve great wealth or great power in their own right, or develop the most esteemed craft or artistic or intellectual skills; but chastity, achieved by negation alone, was a summit for which they could strive.”59 Catholicism offered countless role models for women, starting with the Virgin Mary. Many of the great mystics of the past had been women: Saint Clare, Saint Hildegard, Saint Catherine of Siena—all respected for their holiness and their intellect as well. New restrictions on convents forbade women from leaving to work among the poor or to teach, as their spiritual forebears had, but they could still aspire to mystical union or even sainthood.

Some women, such as the Béguines, aspired to holiness outside the monastic life. Some chose to live as hermits or in small, unstructured communities. In Spain, beatas exercised considerable influence, preaching, writing, prophesying, and taking disciples. Because they lived alone or in independent communities, they were not subject to strictures on convents. They served the poor, mingling freely with the people. Catalina de Jesús, arrested by the Inquisition in 1627, wore a Carmelite habit and took a vow of chastity, but did not belong to any religious order. The masses held her in great esteem, circulating stories of her miracles and collecting relics from her person. Feminist scholarship suggests that the Inquisition persecuted the beatas because they upset the traditional gender structure by assuming leadership roles. Anthropologists submit that the Inquisition pursued these holy women because, since people believed them to be in direct contact with spiritual sources, they threatened Church authority.60 For most women seeking spiritual greatness, the convent offered a less risky path.

But not all the residents of Spain’s overflowing convents entered for spiritual reasons. Because families normally provided dowries only for the oldest daughters, younger daughters were forced to enter the cloister, sometimes at the age of four or five years old. These girls usually took vows without ever having the option to marry. Their celibacy was essential to the economic system, for it prevented burdening the family’s resources, since convent dowries were usually less than marriage dowries.

58. Quoted by Luna, Introduction, Partinuplés, 2.
59. King, Women, 94.
In addition to surplus daughters, orphans, widows, the illegitimate daughters of noblemen, deflowered young women (considered unmarriageable), and women who simply did not want to marry entered convents. In an age when many women died in childbirth or saw their children die of disease or starvation, the convent offered an alternative to conjugal life, so often fraught with danger and sadness. Some convents enjoyed great prestige among aristocratic families. It was not unusual for aunts, nieces, sisters, and groups of cousins to enter a single convent, sometimes forming cliques that imposed their will on other nuns. Wealthy women often entered convents with a retinue of servants and slaves who served them in their

*Adoration of the Shepherds*, by El Greco. For early modern men and women the Virgin Mary was the quintessence of motherhood and femininity.
private apartments on fine china. Of course, many women did enter the religious life out of a desire to serve God and to live apart from the world.

The convent afforded women a degree of autonomy unattainable in the secular world. Convents attracted the daughters of the elite families of Europe, women with contacts and social clout. In the late Middle Ages, abbesses had at times directed double monasteries of men and women, some with vast agrarian resources. By the early modern period, urban convents serving diverse populations had formed, offering women opportunities to govern and perform administrative duties. There, women kept the books, disciplined their peers, and taught novices. Some nuns traveled abroad to found new convents and undertook complex negotiations with Church officials. As soon as the colonization of the New World began, Spanish nuns left their cloisters, crossed oceans, and founded convents in the Americas, where they played an important part in the transmission of Spanish culture and produced a wealth of travel literature.  

61. See Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, Colonial Angels, for an account of the activities of early modern Spanish nuns in the Americas.
In convents nuns performed myriad duties. The *provisora*, or cellaress, was in charge of provisions. The *enfermera* was a healer, physician, and nurse. Sister Maria Celeste, Galileo’s daughter, was her convent’s pharmacist. Before nuns were forbidden to leave the cloister, they performed charity work, caring for the poor, the sick, and the insane. Often they took in abandoned children. For those women who wished to devote themselves to intellectual pursuits, the convent was often the most felicitous option. Furthermore, in the religious community women attained dignity. They earned the respect and esteem of their peers, and they felt close to their sisters. When Protestant reformers “liberated” women from the convents early in the sixteenth century, many nuns resisted. On the other hand, some nuns, such as the Florentine Dominican Beatrice de la Sera (1515–1586) and the Venetian Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652) resented the cloister and protested the forced enclosure of women.

According to Margaret King, “Nuns made up a great fraction of educated women, and cloistered women were disproportionately literate.” 62 The Carmelite reform begun by Teresa de Jesús in 1562 helped promote the education of female religious, for Paragraph 40 of the Or-

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der’s Constitutions stipulated that all Carmelite nuns should be taught to read. Furthermore, the example of the Founder, who produced four major works in her lifetime, served as an impetus for literary production in the convent. However, not all nuns received a comprehensive education, and those who did could not devote themselves to intellectual pursuits at their own discretion. They had to limit their readings to the sacred, and they were expected to answer to a male spiritual director.

Convents of many orders provided novices with at least an elementary education, and some taught Latin. However, as in the Middle Ages, freilas—white-veiled nuns who performed menial tasks—usually learned only to read, not to write. Black-veiled, or choir nuns, received a more thorough education, learning to read and write. A small percentage of women religious used their writing skills to produce literature—autobiographies, hagiographies, biographies of important members of the Order, histories, spiritual treatises, poetry, and plays. Some nuns translated saint’s lives from Latin for the benefit of their sisters. Letter writing, a political and administrative necessity for many nuns, was also an important means of self-expression. By the seventeenth century letter writing, originally considered a masculine pursuit, had been cultivated so zealously in convents and later in French salons, that it came to be seen as a particularly feminine occupation.63

By the end of the sixteenth century, Spanish convents were experiencing an explosion of writing activity. Confessors, anxious to distinguish themselves as the mentor of the next Saint Teresa, commanded their spiritual daughters to produce autobiographies. Often called Vidas, these were not autobiographies in the modern sense, but spiritual memoirs that included prayers, exhortations, lamentations, and commentaries. Sometimes confessors required a nun to write her autobiography in response to a spiritual conflict, although usually they waited until after the situation had stabilized before demanding a written account. For this reason most autobiographies were the work of mature women in their fifties. Cecilia del Nacimiento, who wrote hers at thirty-five, and María de San José, who wrote hers at thirty-seven, were exceptions.64 If a woman’s spiritual practices were suspect—for example, if she claimed to have experienced revelations or ecstasies—her confessor might require her to write a memoir in order to evaluate her situation. Because women were thought to be vulnerable to spurious visions and locutions, which Church authorities saw as a manifestation of satanic influence or female hysteria, confessors were charged with weeding out imposters.

Confessors often influenced women’s writing and even retouched their texts. Saint Teresa’s spiritual directors “corrected” her works, as did Fray Luis de León, who published them. Confessors sometimes used writing to exert control over women, requiring them to work at their memoirs for long hours. The relationship between confessor and penitent could be, as Jodi Bilinkoff has shown, extraordinarily complex, with issues such as sex, class, gender, and

63. See Duchêne, “La lettre: genre masculin et pratique féminine.”
64. See Poutrin, Le Voile et la plume, 126. The bulk of Cecilia del Nacimiento’s autobiography has been lost. See the introduction to her Autobiografía by José M. Díaz Cerón, S.J., in the Obras completas of Cecilia del Nacimiento, in which the editor recounts his efforts to retrieve it. María de San José’s autobiography is included in her Libro de Recreaciones.
age coming into play. However, the autobiography, even masked as obedience, was often an instrument of self-affirmation. Alison Weber and Rosa Rossi have argued that Saint Teresa, although writing in compliance with orders from her spiritual directors, used the opportunity to verbalize and legitimize her own experience.65

Although autobiography has often been characterized as a journey of self-knowledge, Shari Benstock argues that women’s memoirs achieve this in a particular way. Benstock notes that autobiography is always a construct, a fiction. Taking Lacan’s “mirror stage” as her point of departure, she affirms that the image in the mirror, through which we become aware of our bodies and our selves, leads not to immediate self-identification but to a sense of alienation, of “otherness,” for the image is both a bodily and not us. While male autobiography is most often concerned with the conciliation of the “self” and the “reflection,” using language as a means of constructing a “self-image” by articulating boundaries that differentiate the subject from others, women, more aware and accepting of their own alterity, tend to allow language to wander into the shadowy realms of the unconscious and the circumstantial.66 The spontaneity—or messiness—that so many critics have seen in Saint Teresa’s writing stems from its experiential nature. Saint Teresa does not relate “what happened” but how she experienced it—thus, her frequent use of expressions such as paréceme and se me representó. Rather than set clear-cut boundaries, she acknowledges her inability to do so.

Benstock notes that autobiography cannot find self-truth because the self is formed, as much by what it does not remember as by what it does. Teresa recognizes the gaps in her story. Her ambiguity is due precisely to her inability to define with precision her experience, but this very imprecision is the instrument through which she constructs her image. For sixteenth-century women, autobiography becomes a means of self-affirmation not through assertion of worth in terms of titles and achievements, but as an expression of the inner life. Women do not “define themselves” in the way that Guzmán de Alfarache does in Mateo Alemán’s fictional autobiography or even the way Saint Ignatius does in his dictated “Reminiscences.” Instead, they represent their intimate reality, their emotional responses to the context in which they find themselves, and validate that experience through the telling.

Not all early modern women’s Vidas were produced by women themselves. Sometimes they were actually written by confessors. The fifteenth-century predilection for verbal portraits—manifest in works such as Fernán Pérez de Guzmán’s Generaciones y semblanzas and Hernando de Pulgar’s Claros varones de Castilla—continued into the sixteenth and stimulated biographies of holy women. Jodi Bilinkoff explains: “In narrating the story of a woman’s often rocky road to holiness, her confessor/biographer could highlight his own role in that journey. . . . Her story became his story as well, his relationship with the saintly woman his claim to fame. Writing a hagiographical account was also a way of validating his skills as a priest.”67 Thus, although the stated purpose of these biographies was usually to provide behavioral

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65. Poutrin 127–28. See also Bilinkoff, “Confession, Gender, Life-Writing”; Rossi, Teresa de Ávila; and Weber, Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity.
66. See Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical.”
models for Christians, verbal portraits written by confessors often served the same ends as memoirs written under their direction.

The educational level of Spanish nuns began to decline during the seventeenth century. Female religious continued to write, but the Golden Age of convent literature was over—at least in Spain, although in the New World, it was just beginning. Throughout the 1600s the bulk of literature written by women was secular.

Convents were sites of artistic as well as of literary production. Since the Middle Ages convents had produced fine paintings, illuminations, and music. Saint Catherine (Caterina dei Vigri, 1413–1463), patron saint of painters, had been a skilled painter and musician, practicing her art in the Convent of Poor Clares, where she was Abbess. The Cistercian convents in Malaga made special provisions to attract singers and musicians in view of the important role music played in the celebration of the office. Saint Teresa was acutely aware of the power of image to spur spiritual experience and, as Christopher Wilson notes, took care to provide works of devotional art for her convents. At the first reformed Carmelite convent in Avila she had a painting of Saint Joseph placed over the altar and statues of Joseph and Mary at the entrance. She also oversaw the decoration of the hermitages (small structures where individual nuns could retire to pray). The importance she attached to the visual arts reflects the Catholic response to the Protestant reformation, which sought to eliminate images from the churches.68

Few convent artists are known by name because the artist “was an integral undifferentiated part” of the egalitarian community and her individual devotion, expressed through her art, was part of the collective devotion of the group.69 Even so, some artists were celebrated for their talents. María de San Alberto, whose writing is represented in this anthology, was a gifted painter who restored a Veil of Veronica canvas that the best artists in Valladolid had not dared to tackle. However, only religious who made art freely, unencumbered by financial obligation to the convent, enjoyed prestige.

The situation described in Mariana de Carvajal’s “La industria vence desdenes,” in which a young man advances in the priesthood thanks to his artistic talents, was repeated in religious houses throughout Europe. Convents granted dowry waivers to nuns who possessed special artistic or musical talents from which the group might benefit. However, nuns who entered their communities with dowry waivers that obligated them to produce paintings for the community were considered mere artisans and were marginalized by their sisters. “Their productive service activity lowered their prestige in the community . . . by likening them to the lay sisters who performed manual chores in the convent.”70 In contrast, those who performed administrative duties and painted in their spare time were highly respected.

Convents also employed independent painters, some of them priests, some of them secular men or even women. Josefa de Óbidos (1630–1684), also known as Josefa de Ayala, was one of the most acclaimed painters of altarpieces of the seventeenth century. Born in Seville, she

68. See Gómez García, Mujer y clausura, 188–90. See also Wilson, “The Prominence of Images in the Teresian Carmel,” 23–27.
70. Taggard, “Art and Alienation,” 27.
was the daughter of the Portuguese artist Baltasar Gomes Figueira and was elected in her own right to the Lisbon Academy. Early in adult life she settled in Portugal, where she distinguished herself painting allegories, religious subjects, and portraits. Trained in the Augustinian convent of Santa Ana in Coimbra, she did not profess, but nevertheless continued to favor religious themes. Óbidos worked extensively for the Carmelites, producing an important series of scenes of the life of Saint Teresa for the convent at Cascais in 1672.

As Christopher Wilson has demonstrated, soon after Saint Teresa’s death Teresian iconography began to occupy an important place in baroque art. Saint Teresa’s famous vision in which an angel pierces her heart with an arrow was depicted repeatedly in churches and convents on both sides of the Atlantic. Peter Paul Rubens painted a *Transverberation* around 1614 for the church of the Discalced Carmelites in Brussels, and Gianlorenzo Bernini produced a magnificent baroque sculpture for the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Many lesser-known artists also depicted Teresa enraptured, writing, or seeking martyrdom with her brother at the hands of Moors. In the convents art played an important role in stimulating devotion and reinforcing the community’s sense of cohesiveness.
Sophia’s Older Daughters: Medieval Women Writers

How many women wrote during the first ten centuries of Christianity? Few manuscripts survive, but those that do suggest that educated women have existed throughout Western history. The writing women of the early modern era were continuing a practice begun centuries, perhaps millennia, before. Postmodern approaches to writing have prompted a new, broader definition of literature that allows us to appreciate heretofore overlooked texts. Formerly limited to canonical “great works,” literary study now embraces a wide variety of written forms, including journals, memoirs, and letters, thereby enabling us to reclaim many texts by women. Perhaps the oldest medieval document by a woman is the journal of Perpetua, martyred in A.D. 203 in the North African city of Carthage during the persecutions of Christians. Perpetua’s journal, which survives in Latin manuscripts as well as in an abridged Greek version, describes her incarceration and ordeal in moving detail. Nearly two centuries later, Egeria of Spain (381–384) left a detailed account of her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Radegund of Poitiers (520–587), who left her husband to found the monastery of Notre Dame de Poitiers, wrote prose and poetry and promoted scholarly achievement among women. Her nuns had to be literate, for they copied manuscripts and devoted many hours to reading. In Radegund’s The Fall of Thuringia, a short epic comparing this central German region with Troy, she captures the horror of war through individual, personal examples of loss to which the reader can relate. Her vivid, highly descriptive prose reveals an excellent knowledge of classical letters.

Among the most moving texts by a woman of the early medieval period is the Liber Manualis (Handbook for William), by Dhuoda of Uzès (mid-ninth century). A Carolingian mother born in the Frankish realm, she married a man named Bernard who, for unknown reasons, banished her and her young son William to Uzès, in southern France. After casting his lot with the losing side in the war that made Charles the Bald king of Francia Occidentalis (843), Bernard gave William as a hostage to the new monarch, and Dhuoda never saw him again. In Liber Manualis she offers her son guidance for surviving in this world and attaining happiness in the next. She calls her book a mirror in which her son can contemplate the health of his own soul, which will enable him to please both the world and God. Drawing on examples from Scripture and classical texts, she paints a picture of a well-ordered society in which peace is maintained through proper allegiances. She instructs her son to love God and arm himself with virtues, stressing the importance of self-control, moral rectitude, and political acumen. Her writing reveals motherly concern as well as a sense of her own authority. The Liber Manualis elucidates the position of women during the time of Charlemagne and the Merovingian dynasty, for Dhuoda clearly saw herself as influential within the family structure.71

Religious centers were havens for intellectual women during most of the Middle Ages. Hrotswitha of Gandersheim (935?–1001), of noble family, was canoness of the Benedictine monastery of Gandersheim in Saxony. Talented and prolific, she wrote eight hagiographies,

two epics, and several dramas. She was the first nonliturgical playwright in Europe. Performed in the convent, her dramas exalt young Christian women boldly defending their virginity, and are sometimes quite humorous in spite of the seriousness of their themes. For example, in “The Passion of the Holy Virgins Agape, Chonia, and Irene; or, Dulcitius,” Diocletian imprisons three damsels who refuse to renounce their faith. Dulcitius, the provincial governor, has them locked in the pantry, where the cooking pots are kept, in order to sneak in at night and rape them. However, when he attempts to carry out his plan, he suddenly goes mad and winds up embracing the pots. Although Hrotswitha uses many stock characters and plots from classical theater, she revamps them for her audience of religious women. In her two Latin epics, she glorifies the Ottonian dynasty and her monastery.

Scholarship and creative activity burgeoned in the twelfth century, particularly in France, which has led some scholars to speak of a twelfth-century Renaissance. Although the move of erudition from the monastery to the university cut women off from the new scholastic education available to men, Caroline Walker Bynum notes, they “found encouragement and oppor-
tunities to write when vernacular languages and genres emerged in that much-studied shift from oral to written culture.” Many women flourished in this new environment. One of the most prominent was the German abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). An author, composer, political adviser, mystic, and prophet, she wrote collections of visions, plays, poems, and treatises on medicine, cosmology, natural science, and gemology, as well as voluminous letters. Her works contain remarkable drawings, which she had done by artists for whom she left detailed briefs. The daughter of a well-connected family of aristocrats, Hildegard enjoyed the self-confidence that lineage conferred. She took tough stances with Church officials when they opposed her projects, sometimes appealing directly to the Pope in order to get her own way. Although only men were supposed to proselytize, she traveled around Germany preaching until the age of seventy-two. Andrea Hopkins notes: “Her extraordinary assumption of autonomy and her refusal to submit to male ecclesiastical authority often landed her in trouble, but she was a skillful advocate, who managed to argue her way out of problems. . . . She can now be seen as a powerful feminist voice in what was very much a man’s world.” In recent years Hildegard’s music has become very popular and is readily available. Her *Scivias* (a collection of visions) have been published in several modern editions.

Hildegard’s French contemporary Heloise (1100?–1164/65), abbess of the Paraclete, focused on the human, erotic aspect of love. The three Latin letters that she wrote to the theologian Pierre Abelard, her estranged husband, are full of passionate longing. They reveal a high degree of learning and independence of thought. In his *Historia calamitatum* (1132), Abelard describes how he seduced his accomplished pupil Heloise and left her pregnant. The couple married in secret, but the girl’s uncle had Abelard captured and castrated after she entered a convent in Argenteuil. While Abelard resigns himself to his fate, Heloise celebrates sexual passion and her love for her husband. Although the letters have provoked diverse interpretations, Roberta Krueger notes that however one reads them, “it is Heloise’s voice that transforms Abelard’s straightforward exemplum of male lust repented into a vexed account of negotiated gender differences.” It is the letters, not the *Historia*, which gave rise to an enduring legend of Heloise and Abelard.

Unlike most other women religious, Julian of Norwich (1343?–1429?) did not form part of a community, but lived, as an anchoress, with a servant in a cell attached to the church of Saint Julian in Conisford at Norwich. At the age of thirty she fell ill, and, near death, had sixteen visions. She wrote these down soon afterward in what is known as the “Shorter Version” of her *Showings*. About twenty years later, she received an inner illumination that enabled her to understand these experiences more fully. She then produced the “Longer Version,” in which she includes these insights. Julian provided spiritual direction for both men and women, among them Margery Kempe. Her writing is concise, direct, intensely graphic, and theologically sophisticated. Particularly interesting is her treatment of sin, which she sees as inevitable and even desirable, for it fosters repentance, self-knowledge, and the contemplative life. Her re-

frain, “All shall be well” displays sanguinity in the face of human imperfection. Julian’s use of the metaphor of Jesus as mother has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the troubadour culture in France produced a wealth of love poetry that exalted women. Some scholars have suggested that the new lyric was a result of the Hispano-Arab influence on Guilhem de Poitou, the first known troubadour, who may have been exposed to Arab love poetry when he was prisoner at the court of Tancred during the Crusades. Certainly, the early troubadours may have heard Arabic poetry at the Moorish courts of Spain, the nearest neighbor to Occitania, during the Reconquest. Although some scholars question the Arabic influence, most agree that, in the misogynistic atmosphere of the late Middle Ages, the eroticized lyric of the troubadours produced an alternative environment—perhaps one completely unlike everyday life—in which women were celebrated rather than disparaged. Women not only served as the inspiration for this new kind of poetry, but they also produced it.

The female writers of courtly love lyric, called trobairitz, were aristocrats and probably the very women sung by the male troubadours. Some were related to male poets. Meg Bogin argues that whereas the poetry of male troubadours is often highly formulaic, that written by women is more candid and spontaneous: “The language is direct, unambiguous and personal. Even where the technique is of the highest order . . . the most striking aspect of the women’s verse is its revelation of experience and emotion. Unlike the men, who created a complex poetic vision, the women wrote about their own intimate feelings.” Not all researchers share this opinion. For one thing, it is not altogether clear that “women’s songs” are actually autobiographical; the authors may have been simply manipulating inherited structures, inverting the image of the lady to present alternate perceptions of love. Carolyn Larrington notes that the “trobairitz were composing in a tradition which was not of their making, and often seem to subscribe uncritically to the conventions of gender which men employ in their poetry.” They sometimes adopt misogynist attitudes, describing women as treacherous or fickle. For another, the authenticity of several poems attributed to trobairitz has been questioned. Larrington cautions against assuming that poems in which the narrative voice is feminine were actually written by women. Women’s songs represent a tiny fraction of the 2,500 extant troubadour lyrics. Editions of works by trobairitz contain anywhere from twenty-three poems to around sixty—a clear indication the corpus has not yet been fixed.

In spite of unresolved issues, critics believe that the few women’s songs that have been authenticated constitute an important body of work. “The voices of the trobairitz reveal how some women responded in public performances to a tradition created chiefly by male poets who idealized female beauty.” The women’s songs are often blunt in their condemnation of male hypocrisy or lofty in their praise of the beloved. They reveal the pain of abandonment or

75. The area where the Occitan language was spoken. (The language takes its name from oc, “yes,” as distinct from the si and oui of neighboring Romance languages.) The area comprises much of present-day southern France, Monaco, and part of the Italian Piedmont.
76. Bogin, The Women Troubadours, 67–68; Larrington, Women and Writing in Medieval Europe, 44.
frank erotic desire. They may not tell us how women actually lived or how they regarded themselves, but they do offer at least a limited woman’s perspective within the context of the troubadour tradition.

Marie de France, a well-educated noblewoman who lived and wrote in England, is author of a collection of *Lais* (erotic narratives), the *Isopet* (fables based on Aesop), and the *Espurgatoire Saint Patriz* (The Purgatory of Saint Patrick, a translation of a Latin work about a journey through the underworld and paradise). The *Lais* depict women behaving in unconventional ways, expressing their desire openly, and pursuing men. Thiébaut observes: “These heroines are impassioned and impenitent, heedless of nagging moralists. . . . They embrace the men they desire without coyness, without demanding the time-consuming chivalric services of courtly love.”78 Marie’s characters tend to be monolithic and her symbolism conventional, but her female protagonists are dynamic, candid, and engaging.

While some scholars have assigned feminist aims to medieval women writers, others caution that imposing modern ideologies on historical figures can be risky. Even outspoken, influential medieval women such as Hildegard absorbed the misogyny of the period, often disparaging their own sex. However, Christine de Pizan (1365–1430), considered the first professional woman writer, was an exception, for her stance was uncompromisingly pro-woman. Born in Venice, as a child Pizan moved to Paris, where her father was court astrologer. She received an excellent education and at fifteen married a court notary who encouraged her intellectual pursuits. Widowed without an inheritance at twenty-five, she began to write in order to support herself and her three children. Pizan produced some twenty books, all on French politics or the situation of women. Some of her writing reached audiences beyond France, and, in fact, Isabel of Portugal commissioned a Portuguese translation of her *Livre des trois vertus* (Book of the Three Virtues), which was one of the first books to be printed in Portugal.

The stated objective of her best-known work, *Livre de la cité des dames* (The City of Ladies), is to defend women against scurrilous attacks found in misogynist works such as Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*. She begins by explaining that while reading in her study, she began to wonder “how it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior.”79 While she meditates, Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice appear to her in a vision and build with words a walled city to serve as a fortress against misogynist calumnies. Drawing on examples from Scripture, philosophy, history, and legend, they prove the worth of “ladies,” a term Pizan prefers over “women” because, she argues, it confers warranted nobility on all female persons, regardless of their social class. While male moralists tend to see women as unbalanced creatures in need of supervision, Christine sees them as naturally restrained and modest. She argues that women can be good managers and knowledgeable advisors, trusted friends and valiant leaders. She fills her pages with examples of heroic, intellectual, and politically astute

78. Thiébaut, The Writings of Medieval Women, 278.
women—saints and martyrs, queens and Amazons, writers and philosophers. She does not deny that evil women exist, but, she argues, these are exceptions.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century a refined love lyric inspired by courtly culture developed in Spain. Poems were gathered into cancioneros, which could include the work of one poet or many. The oldest of these collections is the Cancionero de Baena, probably compiled between 1425 and 1445. Although the vast majority of the cancionero poets were male, Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego has documented the existence of several female poets. A number of the ladies of Queen Isabella the Catholic wrote poetry, although their participation in the literary life of the court was sporadic. Only one, Florencia Pinar, distinguished herself as a poet. Pinar shows great skill at manipulating language, often creating humorous effects, as illustrated by the play on ay and hay in the following verses: “¡Ay! que [h]ay quien más no vive / porque no [h]ay quien de ¡ay! se duele, / y, si [h]ay, ¡ay! que recele. / [H]ay un ¡ay! con que se esqueve / quien sin ¡ay! vivir no suele.” Barbara Weissberger has noted that in recent years Pinar scholarship has tended to interpret the poet’s work as autobiographical, assuming she was an enamored woman lamenting the ravages of passion or the loss of freedom that results from male dominance. Weissberger calls into question the strictly feminist interpretation, noting that there is no conclusive evidence that Pinar’s work is actually a censure of male oppression.

Following the same line of reasoning as Krueger, Larrington, and Weissberger, François Rigolot notes that early modern writers, both male and female, inherit a love discourse that functions as a series of thematic and linguistic schemes. Use of conventional rhetorical systems implies nothing with regard to the writer’s true emotional state, although some writers are able to create an illusion of spontaneity in their texts and to manipulate inherited systems in subversive ways. Weissberger notes that “the discovery of the polysemy that fifteenth-century poets were intent on achieving on the technical level makes it impossible to continue studying this poetry thematically as the sincere expression of a repressed subject, whether masculine or feminine.”80 The courtly love poet feigns love to fashion and manipulate images. We cannot assume that cancionero poets, including Pinar, express authentic personal sentiments in their poetry. Weissberger suggests that rather than attacking male-dominated society, it is possible that Pinar is skewing images, beating the men at their own game. If the submissive vassal of the courtly tradition masks a predator, suggests Weissberger, perhaps Pinar is playing with the idea that the chaste amada is actually a libidinous female. Pinar’s dazzling control of image could have as its objective the creation of “a simultaneously repressed and liberated, active and passive, feminine and masculine courtly persona.”81

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, women constituted a small minority of humanists, yet, as Margaret King argues in “Book-Lined Cells,” their contribution was significant. Italy produced about twenty important women of erudition, all of which came from the court cities of the North or from prominent families. “Often they were born in families that special-

ized in learning,” notes King. “Some even came from families that specialized in learned women.” Although few continued to write into adulthood, some achieved attention in the public forum before retiring to their “book-lined cells.” Cassandra Fedele pronounced an address on the liberal arts at the University of Padua in 1487, thereby demonstrating that a woman was capable of composing and delivering an oration before a forum of learned men. But Isotta Nogarola’s dialogue on Adam and Eve and Laura Cereta’s letters elucidate how difficult it was for women to pursue scholarship and to achieve recognition for their accomplishments. Significantly, when Nogarola’s reputation as a humanist began to flourish, she was accused of incest. Intellectual women were considered unchaste, and public accusations of this nature were a means of silencing them.

England also produced learned women, but one of the significant woman-authored books of the period was not actually written down by the author herself. The Boke of Margery Kempe, a dictated memoir, is the first known autobiography in English. It was composed by Margery Kempe (1373–1440?), a mystic and pilgrim whose wanderings took her through northern Europe, Italy, and the Holy Land. Narrated in the third person (she refers to herself as “this creature”), her Boke tells of her early years as a wicked woman “who knew no virtue or goodness,” her relationship with her husband, the birth of her child, her fancy clothing and life of vanity, her repudiation of sex, her conversion and visions, her visit to Julian of Norwich, and her subsequent travels. Her language is vivid and dramatic. She says she would rather “eat or drink the ooze, the muck in the gutter than consent to any fleshy communing” with her husband. Frequently outspoken and confrontational, when she hears squires and yeomen using profane language, “this creature boldly confronted them and said they should be damned if they didn’t stop their swearing and the other sins they committed” (Thiébaux, Writings 495). Even when she is dealing with the clergy, Kempe never minces words. Marcelle Thiébaux sees Kempe’s Boke as a precursor of the English autobiographical novel.

Another Englishwoman, Margaret Mauteby Paston (1423–1484), wrote voluminous letters that provide valuable insight into the life of an upwardly mobile fifteenth-century family. Margaret’s husband, John, was the grandson of a bondsman, but the family had acquired land and prestige. Margaret’s letters reveal the concerns of everyday existence in late medieval England, including the management of the family estates, household expenses, and the rancor of neighbors against the parvenus. On Valentine’s Day 1477 Margery composed a charming letter containing two poems for John, then her fiancé. Formal yet affectionate, it gives the reader a fascinating glimpse of the relationship between men and women among the landed gentry during this period.

Spain also produced a secular woman autobiographer during the early fifteenth century: Leonor López de Córdoba (1362?–1412), whose Memorias provide a chilling personal account of political treachery. López de Córdoba lived during one of the most turbulent periods in Spanish history. Her father was the cousin of Pedro I, king of Castile, and held an important

83. The quotes are from Thiébaux, 494, 495.
military position in the realm. Her mother died when she was seven, and the child was married to the son of Pedro’s chamberlain. Within the year, Pedro I was killed by Enrique de Trastamara, his half brother, Leonor’s family was imprisoned in Seville, and her father was executed. Forty years later, after the death of Enrique, Leonor and her husband, the only surviving members of the family, were released. Leonor dictated her Memorias in 1412, ostensibly to thank the Virgin for sustaining her in prison and as an exemplum for other suffering individuals. However, Leonor also had another objective. Impoverished and humiliated after her imprisonment, she composed her memoirs to defend her family name and personal prestige. Although she had risen socially after 1400, she later became embroiled in a dispute between the queen regent and the queen’s brother-in-law and was banished from court. By 1412, she apparently felt that she needed to defend herself. López clearly tries to win the reader’s sympathy with the description of her father’s heroic resistance to Enrique and the brutal details of her family’s incarceration. Her writings may strike modern readers as egocentric, for she is concerned with her own social standing, privileges for herself and her family, and her honor, dismissing as inconsequential the needs of others. However, Leonor López provides us with a dramatic picture of fifteenth-century society and one woman’s rebellion against circumstances.

Although late medieval Spain produced only two noteworthy secular women writers, Florencia Pinar and Leonor López de Córdoba, a significant amount of literary activity was going on in convents. Ronald Surtz discusses five literary nuns (Teresa de Cartagena, Constanza de Castilla, María de Ajofrín, María de Santo Domingo, and Juana de la Cruz) in Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain, but postulates that there were hundreds more.

The most widely studied of the five, Teresa de Cartagena, was the granddaughter of the chief rabbi of Burgos, Salomon Halevy, who converted in 1390 and became bishop of Burgos. Teresa was deaf, and her parents may have placed her in a convent to ensure that she would be cared for. Surtz suggests that because she felt isolated, “The act of writing became a means of both self-consolation and communication.” Like Julian of Norwich, Teresa de Cartagena found spiritual inspiration in her illness. Her first extant work, the Arboleda de los enfermos, purports to show the spiritual benefits of poor health. Criticized for writing about spirituality, a topic considered appropriate only for men, Teresa composed the Admiración operum Dey, in which she defends her right to free expression. Surtz and others have found feminist and meta-literary elements in Teresa’s writing.

Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534), to whom Surtz devotes the book-length study The Guitar of God, was an ascetic and visionary who, at age fifteen, disguised herself in men’s clothing in order to escape to a convent against her parents’ wishes. From 1505 until about 1518 she had mystical raptures during which the Holy Spirit reputedly spoke through her mouth. Her only extant work, El libro del conorte (The Book of Consolation), contains the content of the locutions she transmitted during the liturgical year 1508–9, which were written down by a companion. The book contains some highly imaginative versions of sacred history that might

84. At the time it was not unusual to place an infirm child among the religious. Victoria Lincoln conjectures (without providing evidence) that both Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa had retarded brothers who were entrusted to monasteries. The quote is from Surtz, Writing Women, 22.
strike the modern reader as outrageous. Sister Juana uses a great deal of sexual imagery, frequently depicting the Virgin Mary as nude or undressing. However, Surtz points out that many of the individual elements in these locutions are traditional; they reflect the role of Mary’s body in her intercession for humankind and traditional iconographic representations of purity.

This overview of medieval women writers is by no means exhaustive. Many other women—Queen Matilda of England, Clare of Assisi, Elisabeth of Schönau, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Joan of Arc, Catherine of Sienna, to name just a few—left fascinating texts, some written in their own hands, some dictated. The intellectual women of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries did not emerge from a void, but built on well-established traditions. Although women were excluded from the universities, convents continued to foster women’s writing. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, certain aristocratic families had been educating their daughters in the vernacular, in Latin, and in the classics for decades. Even among the landed gentry and burghers, some women knew how to write and engaged in extensive correspondence. These daughters of Sophia laid the groundwork for the next generation.

**Sophia’s Early Modern Daughters**

In spite of the political and economic regress described by Joan Kelly-Gadol, early modern women advanced intellectually. Gutenberg perfected his movable-type printing press in 1440. By the onset of the 1500s, print had begun to permit a wider distribution of texts than ever before. Now, not only aristocratic and monastic houses had access to books, but also bourgeois libraries. Through books, humanism entered into intellectual circles in all the great urban centers. The important works of the Italian Renaissance found their way into Spain and France, both engaged politically in Italy. Upper-class women were exposed to new ideas, but in some cases so too were those of the merchant and artisan classes, for women had been active in the printing trade since its inception. By the sixteenth century, each of the major European countries was producing women writers who wrote not a sporadic letter, memoir, or poem, but a significant body of work—enough to enable us to compile national anthologies. Of course, women still constituted a tiny minority of writers, but perhaps not as tiny as the limited number of available texts would lead us to believe. Katharina Wilson notes that those writing women who promoted female intellectualism within the ideological confines established by society and religious institutions often won praise, but “the subversive and polemical texts of others earned them persecution, ridicule, and even martyrdom.” Much of the work of these marginalized women went unrecognized. Much of it has been lost or destroyed.

Few of the women who wrote were what we would call today “professional writers.” Marina Brownlee observes: “In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was both socially and ethically controversial to be a professional woman writer of nonreligious literature. . . . Writing women were socially tainted . . . not simply as divided, unintegral human beings, but also as whores, potentially monstrous.” Catherine Gallagher writes: “The seventeenth-century ear

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heard the word ‘public’ in ‘publication’ very distinctly, and hence a woman’s publication automatically implied a public woman. The woman who shared the contents of her mind instead of reserving them for one man was literally, not metaphorically, trading in her sexual property.86 Except perhaps in France, literary women faced strong opposition from the state, society, and religion.

Still, socially high-ranking women sometimes mingled with male intellectuals and participated in literary life. Some were patrons of the arts who attracted an entourage of dependent writers and painters. Italy produced a number of such women. Veronica Gàmbara (1485–1550), for example, was from a powerful northern Italian family active in humanistic circles. Gàmbara received a superior education, which included the study of Greek and Latin. As a girl, she wrote poetry, including a Sapphic ode in classical Latin. She married at twenty-four; after the death of her husband, she expressed her grief in poetry. She governed their property on her own until she died. Gàmbara patronized important artists, including Correggio, and was politically active throughout her adult life. When Carlos V, king of Spain and emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was crowned in Bologna in 1530, she achieved a temporary reconciliation between France and Spain, both warring for control of Italy. In her Sonnet IV she appeals to Carlos V and François I to temper their wrath in the name of Christ, and in Sonnet VI she praises Carlos as one who has already united Europe and America and now brings peace to Italy. She addresses other poems to Cosimo I, second duke of Florence, whom she praises for bringing stability and prosperity to his people. Many of her verses express her admiration for the Medicis. Gàmbara corresponded with several of the great intellectuals of her day, including the humanist Pietro Bembo, her mentor. Gàmbara’s Stanze were highly acclaimed by her contemporaries. Of her literary production some fifty letters and eighty poems remain. One of her most constant themes is poetry itself—the elusive nature of art. She also wrote of the transience of life, love, the death of her husband, the desirability of peace, poets, friendship, and her beloved Italy.

Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547), also a patron of the arts, was a pawn in the power games of the period from the time she was a small child. For political reasons, she was betrothed at age three to a Spanish nobleman who died young. A widow with no children, Colonna surrounded herself with some of the most influential literary figures of her time. Like Gàmbara, she was a friend of Jacobo Sannazaro, author of the first Renaissance pastoral novel, and of Baldesarre Castiglione, author of The Book of the Courtier. Pietro Bembo was her mentor, as he was Gàmbara’s. Her group also included powerful religious figures and artists, among them Michelangelo, with whom she shared a close friendship. In her later years Colonna became associated with certain clerics whose activities the religious authorities found suspect. As a result, the Roman Inquisition put her under investigation, but she died before any action was taken against her.

Known as the “literary queen” of the Renaissance, Colonna was highly praised by her contemporaries. Much of her poetry was published during her lifetime. Her poetic epistle, written

86. Brownlee, The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas, 14, which quotes Gallagher.
to her husband while he was on a military campaign, shows classical influence yet captures convincingly the anxiety of a wife awaiting the return of her warrior husband. In her middle years Colonna wrote a series of love poems, but later turned to religious themes. Her *Triumph of Christ’s Cross*, considered her culminating work, anticipates the meditative and mystical poets of later generations.

Unlike Gañbara and Colonna, Gaspara Stampa (1523/24–1554), considered the finest Italian woman poet of the sixteenth century, was not an aristocrat. She may have been a *cortigiana onesta*, although scholarly opinion is not unanimous on this point. In the Venetian court, where Stampa lived, the *cortigiane oneste* were respected and admired for their beauty and intelligence. They attended to prominent nobles, artists, and clerics, sometimes wielding considerable influence. Stampa was a love poet. Her inspiration was her lover Count Collaltino di Colalto, her “muse” long after their relationship was over. She was well versed in the lyrical conventions of her time, writing sonnets in the style of Petrarch. Like her model, she deified her beloved and insisted on the elevating power of love. Three of her sonnets appeared in print in 1553. Her sister published the entire collection of *Rime* soon after Stampa’s death.

Two early modern Italian women writers stand out for their energetic defense of their sex. Moderata Fonte (1555–1592), whose real name was Modesta Pozzo de’ Zorzi, was a wealthy Venetian matron who died in childbirth at the age of thirty-seven. Her only surviving work is the lively colloquy *Il merito delle donne* (The Worth of Women), although she published an unfinished chivalric romance, the libretto of a *cantata* performed in 1581, and verse narratives of the *Passion of Christ*. *The Worth of Women* belongs to the *querelle des femmes*—the late medieval–early modern debate on women. Fonte structures her work as a spirited discussion among seven upper-class women, one of which has just wed. The more experienced, jaded women attack marriage, while the dreamy young bride defends it. One of the women, Corinna, has decided to renounce marriage in order to devote herself to scholarly pursuits. When the women broach the subject of men’s social and political power, Corinna launches a defense of women, condemning the notion that the sexual hierarchy reflects God’s will and that woman is meant to be subservient to man. The participants complain of men’s ill treatment of women, and then shift their focus to the vindication of the female sex, with the customary catalogue of women who have excelled in government, the military, learning, and the arts.

Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), another Venetian, wrote *Nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne, co’ difetti et mancamenti degli uomini* (The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men) (1600) in response to a virulent harangue by Giuseppe Passi on the defects of women. The daughter of a family of physicians that encouraged her intellectual pursuits, Marinella enjoyed a long literary career and was recognized in her day as an outstanding thinker, capable of complex and subtle argumentation. She was a prolific writer who excelled in many genres, particularly in sacred verse and philosophical love poetry. Passi’s work, considered particularly misogynist even by Renaissance standards, depicted women as wicked creatures given to vice. In *The Nobility and Excellence of Women* Marinella counters Passi point by point to prove that women are virtuous by nature. She uses the time-honored argument
that the souls of men and women are equal, but adds that women are not only as rational as men but even more so. Like Pizan and Fonte, she provides exempla of outstanding women. The second part of her book exposes men’s failings and the abuses to which they subject women. Marinella concludes that women are superior to men in every way—morally, intellectually, and spiritually.

As elsewhere, in Italy much writing by women was produced in convents. Of particular interest is the life story of Camilla Faà Gonzaga (1599–1662). A lady in waiting at the court of the Duchess Margherita of Savoy, wife of Duke Francesco II Gonzaga, Camilla Faà met Francesco’s younger brother Ferdinando in 1615. They married privately the following year, but the match was not politically expedient and Ferdinando’s courtiers pressured him to have it annulled. Ferdinando, who had just become ruler of Mantua, needed a wife from a powerful family in order to secure control. Although Camilla was pregnant, Ferdinando received permission from Pope Paul V to marry Caterina de’ Medici and did so shortly after the birth of Camilla’s son, creating a huge scandal. For five years Camilla resisted Ferdinando’s efforts to marry her off to a courtier, and she then entered a convent, becoming a Clarissa nun. The mother superior asked Camilla to write her story, and the resulting document is as vivid and engaging as a María de Zayas novel. It is also a testimonial to the powerlessness of women without political clout in the intrigue-ridden courts of seventeenth-century Italy. But writing gave Camilla a means by which to affirm her honor. Valeria Finucci comments: “Camilla’s narrative of loss becomes an example of assertive biography, the statement of a candid ‘I’ who refuses to be muffled. . . . Ironically she is able to pick up the pen only when, as a nun, she no longer has a name or a secular identity and has vowed to restrain her voice permanently.”

Like Italy, France produced a significant number of early modern women writers. Cathleen M. Bauschatz studies nine in her overview of sixteenth-century French women’s writing, but she conjectures that there were many more. Perhaps the best known are Marguerite de Navarre and Louise Labé. The sister of François I and grandmother of Henri de Navarre, who would later become Henri IV, Marguerite was a woman of great erudition and a prolific writer of fiction, poetry, plays, and letters. She was a skilled diplomat, and when Carlos V took François prisoner at Pavia in 1525, it was Marguerite who negotiated his release. She was sympathetic to Protestantism, especially its emphasis on Scripture, and patron of like-minded writers such as Rabelais. In accordance with her reformist leanings, she is often highly critical of priests in her writing. Her work Miroir de l’âme pécheresse (Mirror of the Sinning Soul) (1531) met with rapid opposition from the theologians of the Sorbonne.

She participated actively in the querelles des femmes, defending the merits of women; Bauschatz speaks of a “feminist tinge” to her writing. Her collection of stories, the Heptaméron, is a reworking of Boccaccio’s Decameron. (She had intended to include one hundred stories, like her Italian model, but died after completing only seventy-two.) It claims to be a collection of true stories, which a group of men and women recount while they are stranded at an abbey in the Pyrenees after a devastating rainstorm. Marguerite is innovative in her use of

Boccaccio, developing the frame story much more thoroughly than her precursor and using the different storytellers to create a complex perspectivism. Each storyteller has his or her own personality, opinions, and commitments. Marcel Tétel writes: “Since the Female Voice and the Male Voice are each composed of five individual voices, this multivocal presence in each gender has the effect of multiplying and suspending meaning. Each gender Voice is represented by a gamut of opinions.” Bauschatz notes that “many tales, and the storytellers themselves, depict fundamental conflicts between the ways in which men and women see the world and their relation to it.”

Marguerite creates a kind of dialectic between the frame, which depicts an ideal gendered behavior, and the stories, which depict how men and women actually behave.

Unlike most of the women writers of her time, Louise Labé (1520–1566) was not from an aristocratic background, but from a family of artisans. Her father and husband were rope makers, and she herself was known as la belle cordière (“the beautiful rope maker”). Labé was unusually erudite for a woman of her class, having studied music, literature (including mythology), and even the practice of arms. She knew Latin, Italian, and perhaps Greek and Spanish as well, and was said to have fought in the battle of Perpignan. In her Elegy III she depicts herself charging against the Spanish, but scholars doubt the authenticity of her claim to military experience. Labé was at the center of literary life in her native city of Lyon, where she attracted numerous famous writers and scholars to her side, including Maurice Scève, his protégée Pernette du Guillet, and possibly Pierre de Ronsard and Joachim du Bellay. Many poets wrote verses in tribute to her beauty and her intellect; an early edition of her work includes not only her own twenty-four sonnets, but also twenty-four others written in her praise by admirers. Some scholars have suggested that before she married, Labé was a cortigiana onesta like Gaspara Stampa. Whether or not this is true, she was, notes Jeanne Prine, “remarkably frank about matters of passion; chastity and reticence do not seem to have been her chief characteristics.”

During her lifetime she published only one volume, which contains a dedicatory epistle; Débat de folie et d’amour (Debate between Folly and Love), in prose; three elegies and twenty-four sonnets.

Labé wrote poetry in the Petrarchan style, but rather than accepting the traditional role of belle dame, admired and mute, she turns the table on convention. She assumes the customary male poetic function, extolling her beloved’s beauty, rather than his brains. Like Petrarch, she exalts the role of the poet, who achieves immortality through poetry. Scholars have commented on Labé’s self-confidence, her espousal of women’s education, and her deft handling of classical motifs and forms. Her Débat de folie et d’amour is at times playful and funny, yet raises important questions about the nature of love.

Sixteenth-century France produced far more women writers of note than we are able to mention here. Dianne de Poitiers, Hélisenne de Crenne, Pernette du Guillet, Marie de Gournay, Catherine des Roches, and Madame d’Aulnoy are just a few of the many noteworthy examples. By the seventeenth century, France was undergoing, in the words of Faith Beasley, a
“veritable explosion of women’s participation in the literary and intellectual realm.” Beasley notes that during the years 1640–1715 alone, more than 220 women participated in the literary scene in France, their activities as writers and consumers of literature influencing profoundly the development of French letters. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for this phenomenon, Beasley observes that the significant political roles played by Catherine and Marie de Medici and others during the chaotic first half of the century gave women a sense of empowerment. After Louis XIV took the throne in 1661 and stability was restored, many of these politically active women turned to writing.

An important development in regard to female intellectualism in this period is the emergence of the ruelle, which would evolve into the literary salon in the next century. The ruelles were gatherings in a home where, during the early 1600s, language and manners were the main topics of conversation. By mid-century, literary topics had become the focus of the ruelles, although subjects such as women’s emotional life, marriage (often viewed as slavery), contemporary philosophy (for example, the ideas of Descartes), and, above all, le bon gout (good taste) were discussed at length. Whereas the eighteenth-century salon was frequented by both men and women, the ruelle was always run by a woman and dominated by females. Ruelles were held by bourgeois women as well as aristocrats, and at these meetings the social classes sometimes mixed. In many ways, the ruelles were run like academies, with the difference that the academies generally excluded women. Also, unlike in the academies, where works were assessed according to traditional scholarly standards, in the ruelles they were judged by their ability to please.

This new literary milieu fostered women’s creativity, in particular in the novelistic genres. The printing revolution of the late fifteenth century had touched every major urban center of Europe; by the sixteenth century books were being printed in all modern European languages. Sacred and devotional books, humanistic treatises, and scientific and scholarly books were more widely disseminated than ever before possible, and the new technology also created markets for popular fiction. Women became both consumers and producers of novels. As in Spain the century before, in France pastoral fiction attracted large audiences, but while women were drawn to the pastoral as readers, as writers they excelled in the historical novel.

Madame de Scudéry wrote a number of heroic novels situated in exotic historical settings, such as ancient Greece. These novels explored serious topics, such as love and marriage, and attained considerable popularity. However, by mid-century readers began demanding more plausible stories. A new kind of historical novel, the nouvelle historique, avoided the long digressions and excessive adventures of the earlier epic novels. They were usually set in sixteenth-century France, and provided more tightly woven plots in which fact and fiction were almost indistinguishable from each other. Indeed, plausibility—from the perspective of psychology as well as storyline—was a fundamental goal of the writers of this kind of historical fiction.

Women excelled in this new genre. In 1662 Madame de Lafayette (1634–1693) authored La Princesse de Montpensier (The Princess of Montpensier), considered the first nouvelle his-

torique. Madame de Lafayette’s best-known work, *La Princesse de Clèves* (The Princess of Clèves) (1678) is the first historical novel for which the author conducted serious research in order to recreate a remote period. In it Lafayette examines emotional and ethical issues involving love and marriage. Madame de Villedieu (1640–1683) was the most prolific author of the new historical novel in her day, and in fact made her living by writing. She published fourteen novels, poetry, plays, and fictional autobiography and, unlike many women writers, signed her work. Villedieu was also a theorist, elucidating in her prefaces her notion of the *nouvelle historique* and explaining her method. She was particularly interested in the relationship between fiction and history.

Sometimes the works that emerged from the salon environment were collective. A case in point is the *Maximes* of Madame de La Rochefoucauld. Although the collection of maxims carries La Rochefoucauld’s name, participants in the groups she frequented offered their own observations and contributions, causing her to rewrite, revise, and add to her material. Today critics consider the *Maximes* the work of many authors rather than just one.

Perhaps the best-known French woman writer of the seventeenth century is Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné (1626–1696), friend to Madame de Lafayette and many other eminent women of the period. Meticulously educated and married at eighteen to the baron Henri de Sévigné, she was widowed at twenty-five. Having inherited fortunes both from her mother and husband, she managed her estate herself and participated in the civic activities to which property entitled her. She was active in literary circles, associating with both male and female writers.

Madame de Sévigné was an avid letter-writer. Her over fifteen hundred extant missives offer a firsthand glimpse of the glory and violence of seventeenth-century France. Jeanne and William Ojala write: “Through the eyes of this intelligent, observant, independent, and robust aristocratic woman the reader is immersed in the glittering and cultured *beau monde* of the Splendid Century. Grand fêtes, brutal executions, court intrigues, wars and rebellions, and intimate family affairs are all recorded in a vivid, witty, and at times earthy style.”91 She traveled extensively and described her experiences. She corresponded with a vast array of persons, from politicians to family members. Many of her letters are to her daughter. She wrote of functions at court in the company of Louis XIV, the *Roi Soleil*. She chronicled parties, love affairs, pregnancies, and political events. Her letters reveal warmth, joie de vivre, equanimity, and openness.

The Protestant Reformation had devastating effects on women’s writing, for when Luther closed the convents, important centers of female literary productivity disappeared. Luther and Calvin shared with many Catholic reformers a low opinion of women’s intellectual capabilities and thought that education “was to make [women] good domestic servants or household managers, dutiful wives, committed mothers, and believing Christians, but nothing more.”92 Nevertheless, the German principalities did produce a number of distinguished women writers, both Catholic and Protestant.

Barbara Pirckheimer (1467–1532), for example, was an outstanding humanist who maintained an active correspondence with other humanists of her time. Taking the name Caritas, she entered the convent of the Sisters of Saint Clare around 1483 and became its abbess in 1503. Her superiors forbade her from exhibiting her erudition publicly, which put an end to the richly stimulating letter writing in which she had engaged with some of Germany’s foremost scholars. However, when Luther ordered the religious houses closed, Caritas used her considerable intellectual skills to save her convent. In 1525 the City Council of Nuremberg demanded that she free her nuns of their vows, allow them to leave the cloister, and instruct them to wear secular dress. Caritas composed a heroic response and, after much maneuvering, managed to obtain permission to keep the convent open, although only until the death of the present inhabitants.

A near contemporary of Caritas, Margaret of Austria (1480–1530) was the widowed aunt of Carlos V and the daughter of Emperor Maximilian I. She was a worldly, aristocratic woman who exerted power in a man’s world. In 1497 she married Juan, son of Ferdinand and Isabella, who died that same year, and in 1501 she married Philibert of Savoy, who died three years later. In 1507 she became Carlos V’s regent in the Netherlands. She acted as a mediator between her father, head of the Holy Roman Empire, and his subjects in the Low Countries, negotiating a commercial treaty with England that advanced Flemish textile interests. She also assisted in the formation of the League of Cambrai (1508–10), an alliance formed by Maximilian I, Louis XII of France, Ferdinand V of Aragon, Pope Julius II, and several Italian city-states to curb the territorial expansion of the republic of Venice. Although Carlos V rebelled against her counsel as a young man, he came to value her as a shrewd adviser. After 1517 she served as regent sporadically until her death. In 1529 she negotiated the Treaty of Savoy in Carlos V’s name with Louise of Savoy, acting in the name of her son François I of France. The treaty came to be known as the “Ladies’ Peace.” Margaret was friends with many important humanist writers and poets, among them Erasmus. However, her own writing reflects a taste for the kind of poetic games that were popular in European courts a century earlier. In addition to her poetry, Margaret left letters to some of the most influential men and women of early modern Europe.

The poet Anna Owena Hoyers (1584–1655) has been described as a Renaissance humanist, but, as Brigitte Edith Archibald explains, German humanists were less concerned than the Italians with the psychology and functioning of the human being than with Christ as a model of the “ideal moral personality.” Hoyers, the daughter of an astronomer, studied not only the classics but also astronomy and mathematics. Something of a rebel, after her husband’s death she began associating with unorthodox religious types, which incensed the local clergy. She in turn adopted a radically anticlerical stance, writing poetry that mocked the ignorance, debauchery, and hypocrisy of village parsons. She also takes a defiant stand with regard to women’s writing. Her poem To the Christian Reader begins: “This book written by a woman / Will undoubtedly be enjoyed / Because such has never been seen / Coming from a woman: / One should read it and observe it / And not take notice of the scoffers / Who say: it is not right / That a woman should write.” In another poem on widowhood, Hoyers expresses a generally
negative view of marriage when she advises older widows not to remarry, but instead, to “Love the life of being alone.”

Catharina von Greiffenberg (1633–1694) was one of the most remarkable German women intellectuals of the seventeenth century. Her family belonged to the Protestant landed aristocracy, and like many other early modern women of her class, she was educated by her father and, after his death, by her uncle, Hans Rudolph baron von Greiffenberg, whom she later married. She was well versed in Baroque poetics. Her literary mentor, Johann Wilhelm von Stubenberg, belonged to the circle that founded the “Floral Order of Pegnitz” and the “Fruit-Bearing Society,” two of the many literary groups that were formed in the period to advance German letters. In 1662 Catharina published a collection of her poems that included 250 sonnets, fifty-two Lieder or “songs,” and forty-eight other poems, and that was highly praised by Germany’s Protestant cognoscenti. Von Stubenberg and his friends encouraged her to use her poetic talents to convert Austria’s monarchs to Protestantism, and some of her writing suggests this intent. In addition to poetry, von Greiffenberg wrote devotional books. She was one of two female members of the “German-Minded Association,” a prestigious literary society. Extremely devout and talented, von Greiffenberg was apparently torn between the intellectual life and marriage. After she wed her uncle, she continued writing in the privacy of her home. Much of her work is religious. Major themes are Christ’s suffering on the Cross, human suffering as a path toward the divine, God’s grace, and the Resurrection. Her poem “On Jesus, the Crucified” was written in the form of a cross, a manifestation of the Baroque concern with the visual. Her “Victory-Support of Penitence and Faith” (1675), written around the time of the Turkish invasion of 1663, explores the interaction of Islam and Christianity. Von Greiffenberg also translated religious works into German. Her devotional books, which she produced in her later years, consist of interpretations of biblical passages combined with original poems.

The Reformation affected women’s education differently in England than in Germany. In England as elsewhere, the daughters of aristocrats were usually educated at home, either by their parents or by private tutors. However, convent schools did continue to exist, for the Anglican Church did not abolish nunneries. These schools were soon supplanted by other types of religious and nonreligious institutions, giving rise to what would become the English boarding-school system. Many English girls received excellent educations. In fact, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, female literacy rates were higher than in France.

English home schooling sometimes produced remarkably intellectual women. The three daughters of the great humanist Thomas More (1478–1535) received the same education as his son, as did More’s foster children and other charges. In More’s household the children studied with some of the best minds in England, their father overseeing their education him-

93. The quote is from Archibald, “Anna Owena Hoyers: A View of Practical Living,” 304. Hoyer’s poetry is from Wilson, Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation, 311, 316.
94. More, the author of Utopia, refused to support King Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic Church, for which he was arrested and beheaded.
self. Their rigorous curriculum included Latin and Greek, the seven liberal arts, theology, and medicine. A staunch supporter of women’s education, More, like his good friend Erasmus, believed that learning was conducive to piety and modesty—an idea echoed by Juan Luis Vives in his Education of a Christian Woman. In his day More was highly esteemed for his views on education. His “school” was widely known and celebrated in humanist circles throughout Europe.

More’s eldest (and favorite) daughter, Margaret More Roper (1505–44), was one of the great intellects of her day. She translated Erasmus’s commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer into English, considered a major endeavor because it is “one of the earliest examples of the Englishing of Erasmian piety. . . . It domesticates and disseminates Erasmus’ view of the devotional life” and is “also a fine example of early Tudor English prose.”95 Roper’s translation is an unmatched example of humanist scholarship produced by a woman in Renaissance England. Margaret Roper’s correspondence with her father is a moving testimony of their extraordinary affection for one another.

Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603), a towering figure of the second half of the sixteenth century, experienced such a tumultuous childhood that at age six, she reputedly had the gravity of a woman of forty. Her father, King Henry VIII, had married her mother, Anne Boleyn, because his previous wife had failed to produce a male heir, but he soon grew tired of her and had her beheaded for adultery and treason. Having received a rigorous humanistic education, Elizabeth ascended to the throne after the death of her half-sister Mary, a Catholic. Elizabeth returned the country to Protestantism, reducing the size of the Privy Council to eliminate the Catholic members and choosing efficient, gifted advisers to serve her.

Although she faced fierce opposition from men such as John Knox, who thought women unfit to rule, Elizabeth secured power through astute, effective policies that brought honor and prosperity to England. She steadfastly refused to marry, knowing that if she were to take a husband, he, not she, would wield authority. She shrewdly cultivated her image as the Virgin Queen, thereby becoming an object of adoration that replaced the Virgin Mary in Protestant England.

She was also an intellectual force. The Elizabethan age, characterized by the flowering of the arts, produced some of the giants of English literature: William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. Elizabeth herself wrote poetry, verse translations, speeches, and letters. Among her poems are a number of short compositions and a translation of the Thirteenth Psalm of David. Her speeches reveal an astute politician, able to appease challengers without compromising her own intentions. For example, in the “Marriage Speech,” delivered on February 10, 1559, after the House of Commons had asked her to marry, Elizabeth thanks the representatives and assures them she is pleased with their petition, yet eschews any concrete commitment. Elizabeth’s correspondence includes letters to Catherine Parr (her father’s sixth and last wife), Queen Mary, Mary Queen of Scots, and the Charter issued to Sir Walter Raleigh.

Among the ladies of Queen Elizabeth’s court, Mary Sidney, countess of Pembroke (1561–1621), was undoubtedly the most influential literary personality. The sister of Sir Philip Sidney (poet and author of Elizabethan England’s most acclaimed pastoral novel) and the poet Robert Sidney, Mary was considered England’s leading literary woman after Queen Elizabeth and the most important nonroyal woman writer of her time. In 1577 she married Henry Herbert, the second earl of Pembroke, after which she retired to her husband’s estate and gathered around her England’s most renowned writers, musicians, and artists, including Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, and John Davies.

After her brother Philip died in 1586, Mary Sidney devoted much of her time to the completion and publication of his works. She produced a composite edition of his _Arcadia_ and finished the verse translations of the Psalms he had commenced (providing 107 of 150 of them). Her first known work is an elegy for her brother, _The Doleful Lay of Clorinda_, published in 1595. Like her brother, she was interested in introducing literary innovations from the Continent to England. Her translation of Robert Garnier’s drama _Antoine_ (1578) is among the first plays in blank verse published in English and helped introduce into England the practice of using historical drama to comment on contemporary politics. She translated Philippe de Mornay’s _Discours de la vie et de la mort_ (Discourse on Life and Death) and Petrarch’s _Trionfo della morte_ (Triumph of Death). She also wrote original poems and a short pastoral for Queen Elizabeth entitled _A Dialogue between Two Shepherds_.

The Countess of Pembroke encouraged her niece and godchild, Mary Sidney Wroth (1587?–1651?), to write poetry, and the younger woman’s work was highly praised by such luminaries as Ben Jonson. When her husband died in 1614, leaving her deeply indebted, Mary Sidney Wroth published, perhaps to earn money, part of her novel _Urania_, the first book-length work of fiction by a woman to be printed in England. Her other works were never published but were circulated at court in manuscript, as was typical of women’s writing. In Wroth’s novel the heroine, Pamphilia, rejects marriage, like Queen Elizabeth I, in order to devote herself to governing her kingdom. Apparently the intrigues of the novel paralleled too closely those of the court, because the work caused a scandal and the author was forced to withdraw it. The book ends with a series of poems entitled _Pamphilia to Amphilanthus_.

The fifteen Spanish women included in this anthology were not unique. In all parts of Europe (including the Low Countries and Scandinavia), women made significant contributions to literary life. In Spain, many more wrote than these fifteen. Research in convents and archives is just beginning to unearth the wealth of women’s writing requiring critical attention. In their anthologies of early modern women’s poetry, Clara Janés and Julián Olivares and Elizabeth Boyce provide examples of the writing of more than forty poets. Some of these deserve mention: Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566–1614) was a nun who went to England to confront the Protestants. Her sonnets were published in the nineteenth century as _Poesías espirituales_. The Portuguese nun Violante do Ceo (1601–1693) took the veil without vocation and led a worldly life. In the convent she devoted herself to her studies and socialized with some of the most distinguished members of the literary world. Her works were published as _Rimas varias_ in 1646. María de Santa Isabel, a seventeenth-century nun probably of the Real Convento de la Con-
Convents produced the bulk of Spanish prose as well as poetry written by women in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. María de Santo Domingo, a Dominican nun, left an exquisite prayer book published in 1990 by Mary Giles. Isabel de Jesús (1611–1682), whose autobiography, Tesoro del Carmelo, was published posthumously in 1685 by her confessor, Manuel de Paredes, employed a wealth of narrative and rhetorical strategies to undermine misogynist tradition and defend her own authority; her writing has been examined meticulously by Sherry Velasco. One of the most interesting spiritual autobiographies of the period is Mística ciudad de Dios y vida de la Virgen, by María de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–1665), the so-called flying nun. A political and spiritual adviser to King Philip IV, María de Ágreda offers highly unorthodox commentaries on the Holy Family. She also recounts her mystical experiences and visions, claiming to have “bi-located” to America, where she preached to Indians. Even in her own time, her claims to have flown across the ocean while remaining in her convent provoked disdain from the cultured elite. Nevertheless, she is still venerated in parts of the American Southwest, where she is known as the miraculous Blue Lady. A book-length study on María de Ágreda was published in 2000 by Lia Pierotti Cei. Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea (1602?–1690) entered the convent at the age of three. An autodidact, she reached a degree of erudition unusual in a nun in the seventeenth century. Equally extraordinary was her association with the Huesca literary group, whose most famous member was Baltasar Gracián. Abarca de Bolea’s Vigilia y octavario (1679) is a loosely constructed pastoral centering on a pilgrimage to a shrine in the Sierra de Moncayo. Judith Whitenack and Gwyn Campbell comment that Abarca’s work is “primarily didactic and inspirational in character and thus is not particularly amenable to modern tastes.” Abarca wrote five books, three of which are extant, and many poems, some of which appear in the anthologies by Janés and Olivares and Boyce. Other women writers whose work has recently attracted critical attention are Josefa de Meneses, who defends women against misogynist attacks in her as yet unpublished Despertador del alma al sueño de la vida (1695); Luisa de Padilla, Condesa de Aranda, who criticizes men’s abuses in Lágrimas por la nobleza (1639), reproduced in Serrano y Sanz; and María de Guevara, to whom the unpublished philosophical work Desengaños de corte y mujeres valerosas (1664) has been attributed.

In 1999 Mary Giles published Women in the Inquisition, a collection of women’s testimonies before the inquisitorial tribunals as they were written down by notaries. Although these documents do not constitute women’s writing in a strict sense, they are an important source of information about early modern Spanish women. As Giles points out, few sixteenth-century women had the intellectual and rhetorical resources of a Teresa de Jesús or a María de San José. In an age when even among the aristocracy women’s schooling was usually limited and educated women rarely had the freedom or the audacity to put pen to paper, the judicial statement was a vehicle—albeit an adulterated one—of female expression.

96. Zayas and Her Sisters 356.
Early modern women not only wrote, but also painted and composed music. In addition to Josefa de Óbidos, early modern Spain produced another important woman artist, Luisa Roldán (1656–1704), known as La Roldana. Born in Seville, she is Spain’s first known woman sculptor and became Escultora de la Cámara under Carlos II. She is known for her works in terracotta and polychrome wood. Probably the best-known woman artist of the period is the Italian Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1652), whose work was greatly admired by Charles I of England and by the Spanish elite, including Philip IV, who acquired several of her paintings. The daughter of another famous painter, Orazio Gentileschi, she has been the subject of numerous studies and three novels. In 2002 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York mounted an exhibition of the works of both Gentileschis.

Other early modern Italian women artists are Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665), Maria del Po (1649–1716), and Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757). English painters of the period include Mary Beale (1632–1697), Anne Killigrew (1660–1685), and the miniaturist Susan Penelope Rosse (1652–1700). France also produced significant women painters, among them Esther Kello (1571–1624); Louise Moillon (1610–1696), considered by some the best French still-life painter of her century; and Elisabeth Sophie Cheron (1648–1711). Among the Dutch artists worthy of

*Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist,* by Luisa Roldán. Luisa Roldán was court sculptor under Charles II.
mention are Judith Leyster (1609–1660), Maria van Oosterwyck (1630–1693), Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), and Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), who was born in Germany of a Dutch mother and Swiss father. Switzerland produced one significant woman artist in the seventeenth century: the miniaturist Anna Waser (1675–1713).

Early modern women also excelled in music. Some of the poets mentioned here were excellent composers and musicians, among them Hildegard of Bingen, Christine de Pizan, Margaret of Austria, Anne Boleyn, and Queen Elizabeth I. Convent culture fostered musical achievement and in Spain, the sixteenth-century nun Sister Gracia Baptista was a highly respected composer and arranger. The Lombard nuns of the seventeenth century were known as composers, musicians, and singers, as were the Benedictine nuns of the Convent of Santa Radegonda, in Milan. These nuns include Caterina Assandra, Isabella Leonarda, Maria Xaviera Perucona, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, and Bianca Maria Meda. Sister Lucretia Orsina Vizzana (1590–1662) not only composed but also published new music. Other significant women musicians include the Neapolitan singer Anna Inglese (fifteenth century); the musician and patron of the arts Isabella d’Este (1473–1539), daughter of the Duke of Ferrara; the composer Sofonisba Anguissola (1534–1625); the composer, lutenist, and singer Maddalina
Casulana (sixteenth century); and the composer Francesca Caccini (1587–1640). The Dutch composer Suster Bertken (1426/27–1514) and the English composer Jane Pickering (early seventeenth century) are also worthy of note.

Where We Are Now

During the last three and a half decades an enormous amount of research has been done on the condition of women in early modern Europe. Scholars such as Constance Jordan, Joan Kelly-Gadol, Margaret L. King, Joan Ferrante, Patricia Labalme, Margaret Ferguson, Merry Wiesner, Elisja Schulte Van Kessel, Katharina M. Wilson, Mary Beth Rose, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Arlette Farge—to name only a few—have thrown light on the active roles women played in the economic, religious, and social life of the period, even though the vast majority were deprived of education, status, and power. For the most part, these studies focus on England, France, Italy, and the Germanic countries. Practically the only Spanish women mentioned by literary and historical researchers in early modern Europe are Teresa de Jesús and María de Zayas. This is not surprising in view of the dearth of available texts by early modern Spanish women writers that has plagued scholars until now. As late as the late 1980s scholars were forced to rely for texts by women on Manuel Serrano y Sanz’s Apuntes para una biblioteca de autoras españolas, published in 1903 and reissued in 1975, or else on archival editions and manuscripts. Yet, it is not clear, as Paul Julian Smith asserts, that Spain produced fewer early modern women writers than other European countries. In recent years the availability of texts has improved dramatically and more critical editions appear continually.

In the area of fiction, Zayas and Her Sisters (2000), edited by Judith Whitenack and Gwyn Campbell, provides examples of novelas by four early modern women authors. Another anthology of fiction, Entre la rueca y la pluma, edited by Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros and María Haro Cortés, contains the work of three. Historia de la monja alférez, by Catalina de Ernuso, has appeared in two modern editions, one by Jesús Munárriz and the other by Rima Vallbona, both problematical.97 El deseño más firme, by Leonor de Meneses (1994), edited by Judith A. Whitenack and Gwyn E. Campbell, has been superseded by their anthology. Alicia Redondo Goicoechea published a new edition of several novelle by María de Zayas in 1989.

Extensive work is currently being done on convent literature. Among the first and most influential books on this subject is Untold Sisters (1989), by Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau (now unfortunately out of print), an anthology of the writing of a number of Spanish and Spanish American nuns. Ronald Surtz’s studies Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain (1995) and The Guitar of God (1990) and Isabelle Poutrin’s Le voile et la plume (1995), all of which contain samples of convent writing, have stimulated further research in this area.

The 1990s saw an explosion of interest in plays written by women, thanks in large part to Lola Luna’s editions of Ana Caro’s comedias, El conde Partinuplés (1993) and Valor, agravio y

97. Munárriz’s edition is not annotated and is somewhat inaccurate. Vallbona’s uses early modern spelling and is so heavily annotated that it is difficult to read.
mujer (1993), and to Teresa Soufas’s Women’s Acts, an anthology of the works of five Golden Age women playwrights. A new edition of María de Zayas’s La tradición en la amistad (1999) provides useful notes by Valerie Hegstrom and a fine translation by Catherine Larson. A number of poetry anthologies, among them Las primeras poétisas en lengua castellana (1986), edited by Clara Janés, and Tras el espejo la musa escribe (1993), prepared by Julián Olivares and Elizabeth Boyce, brought to light poetry by women ranging from the burlesque to the philosophical.

The growth of an accessible corpus of writing by early modern Spanish women has stimulated myriad historical and literary studies. Mary Elizabeth Perry’s Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville (1980) was one of the earliest in-depth analyses of Spanish female religious. Mariló Vigil’s La vida de las mujeres en los siglos XVI y XVII (1986) provided an overview of the lives of women in Spain and Mexico. More recently, investigators such as Anne Cruz, Luce Irigaray and Ruth El Saar have applied feminist, Freudian, and post-Freudian critical theory to the study of early modern Spanish women. A number of feminist critics, such as Alison Weber, Gillian Ahlgren, and Carole Slade have prompted a reevaluation of Teresa de Jesús, while historians such as Jodi Bilinkoff have contributed to our understanding of Teresa’s social, political, and religious milieu. María de Zayas has inspired numerous scholarly articles and doctoral dissertations during the past decade. Three full-length studies of Zayas were published in the years 2000 to 2001: María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men, by Margaret Greer; The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas, by Marina Brownlee; and Reclaiming the Body: María de Zayas’s Early Modern Feminism, by Lisa Vollendorf. María de Zayas: The Dynamics of Discourse (1994), edited by Amy Williamsen and Judith A. Whitenack, contains studies by several authors on diverse aspects of Zayas’s work. Whereas a decade ago Zayas was practically the only woman author of fiction whose work had inspired a sizable corpus of criticism, today critics are turning their attention to Carvajal, Meneses, and others. The availability of plays written by women has spurred extensive analysis of Spain’s dramaturgas. Teresa Soufas prepared Dramas of Distinction: A Study of Plays by Golden Age Women Writers (1997) to accompany her anthology. Engendering the Early Modern Stage (1999), edited by Valerie Hegstrom and Amy Williamsen, contains articles on both secular and religious drama by women. Collections of essays such as Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism (1989), edited by Hernán Vidal, have helped us define critical parameters, while Spanish Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book (1993), edited by Linda Gould Levine, Ellen Engelson Marson, and Gloria Feiman, contains fundamental data for the researcher.

In addition, feminist theorists have provided us with useful tools for examining women’s writing. Since the 1970s critics have debated whether women’s writing is fundamentally different from men’s. In The Laugh of Medusa (1975) Hélène Cixous proposed the concept of écriture féminine, specifically gendered writing that can be defined as “feminine” in essence because of its particular style, tone and sensitivity, and which is different from male discourse. According to Cixous, while “men’s writing” is rational, logical, hierarchical, and linear, “women’s writing” is just the opposite; it transcends rationality, logic, hierarchy, and linearity. Thus,
it may be perceived as a-rational or even irrational, a-logical or even illogical, a-hierarchical and circular. Both correspond to culturally defined gender codes, but, in Cixous’s view, “masculine writing” is valued in Western culture, while “feminine writing” is not.

Cixous sees the difference in men’s and women’s writing as the product of the mind-body schism in Western culture. She argues that *écriture féminine* is not the result of biological determinism, inasmuch as women can write like men and men like women. Instead, “women’s writing” stems from the mother-child relationship that exists before the child acquires conventional language. This “potential language” subverts rationality and logic, permitting psychological free play unconstrained by structure and order. Western culture privileges mind over body. Thus, men learn to “rise above” the body and the realm of “potential language” in order to express themselves cogently and coherently, an ability considered essential to good writing in a culture that views writing as a mental activity. Women, on the other hand, remain tied to the body and so have traditionally been considered incapable of good writing. Cixous, rather than deny the difference between men’s and women’s writing, celebrates *l’écriture féminine*, urging her readers to embrace what for centuries Western culture has maligned.

Along the same lines, in essays such as “This Sex Which Is Not One” Luce Irigaray posits a “woman’s language” that is varied, fluid, and heterogeneous. Irigaray rejects traditional psychoanalytic notions, which view the masculine as the norm, thereby evading what she considers the phallocentric monopoly on language and culture. Female sexuality, which Freud defined as a “lack” (that is, the lack of a penis, one particular sex organ), is characterized, in Irigaray’s view, by multiplicity: “So woman does not have a sex organ? . . . But woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere.”98 This multiplicity spurs women to express themselves in more flexible, diverse ways than men.

These notions of “masculine” and “feminine” writing have given rise to endless controversy. Kristeva, for example, seems uncomfortable with these stark categorizations, stressing instead the communicative (rather than purely expressive) aspect of language. Language requires restraint, submission to the law (or rules of language), associated with the masculine. “When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other—precisely a non-object, a pattern, a model—I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, unification. An identification. For me to have been capable of such a process, my libido had to be restrained. . . . In being able to receive the other’s words, to assimilate, repeat and reproduce them, I become like him: One.”99 Thus, the female writer cannot be entirely autonomous, cannot distance herself from the law, cannot yield entirely to her a-rational, a-logical, preverbal impulse because the very act of using language necessitates conformity with pre-established limits. Language by its very nature imposes boundaries and restrictions.

Both schools of thought provide instruments with which to approach women’s writing. In his study of Teresa de Jesús and María de Zayas, Paul Julian Smith negotiates conciliation between two ostensibly opposing notions, employing both in his analysis. It is not necessary to

embrace blindly or to apply indiscriminately the notions of *l’écriture féminine* or linguistic determinism. However, an awareness of how gender affects literary expression is essential. *L’écriture féminine* can function as a filter that makes us aware of silences, lapses, shadows, unaccustomed angles, and unusual focuses that might otherwise go unnoticed in works by women. Likewise, an awareness of the constraints of inherited forms, of the very limits of language, increases our sensitivity to women’s ability to manipulate and exploit conventional structures, to use rhetoric in subversive ways.

Feminist theoreticians have helped scholars focus on issues such as power, class, and caste. They have brought to the forefront the consequences of marginalization. They have shown how women gain autonomy and authority through writing and how they use inherited codes in unconventional ways. They have helped us to see the political impact of women’s writing. They do not always agree with one another, and we may not agree with all of them or any of them. But feminist theoreticians have provided vocabulary and rhetoric for speaking of issues concerning women. They have spurred us on to recover a long tradition of women’s writing. They have greatly increased our knowledge of history, of our foremothers, and of ourselves, and whether we accept their perspectives or not, we learn from them.