



“Si no fuere tu hija ilustre”: Women Writers’ Social Status in Early Modern Spain

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Abstract. The numbers of women writers of the early modern Spain currently identified have risen to over five hundred, with their writings catalogued and systematized by the Spanish data base Biblioteca de Escritoras Españolas (BIESES). The data base’s findings demonstrate the kinds of genres women writers selected, and includes archival documents, correspondence, and other kinds of documentation that reveal much more biographical information than previously obtained. What has yet to be studied more in depth, however, is the social status of the writers, as social origins were a crucial means of identifying one’s self, both from a psychological perspective as well as within society. This article examines the social stratification of writers to weigh their contributions, and arrives at the conclusion that while non-noble women tended to dedicate their time to writing literary works, whether poems, theater, or prose fiction; the few women of the titled nobility who wrote instead authored non-literary works such as correspondence and treatises that allowed them to participate significantly in political crises of the time.

Keywords: Spanish women writers; Social origins; Literary genres; Political treatises; Correspondence

Resumen. Hasta la fecha, se ha logrado identificar a más de 500 escritoras de la España temprana moderna cuyas obras han sido catalogadas y sistematizadas por la base de datos española Biblioteca de Escritoras Españolas (BIESES). Las investigaciones llevadas a cabo por el proyecto han rendido cuenta de los diferentes géneros literarios de las obras, así como se ha encontrado una cantidad de documentos de archivo, cartas y demás documentación, la cual revela cada vez más información biográfica. Lo que todavía no se ha estudiado a fondo, sin embargo, son los diferentes niveles sociales de las escritoras, puesto que los orígenes de las mismas proporcionan una clave esencial para su propia psicología y su papel social. El ensayo examina los varios niveles sociales de las escritoras para evaluar su contribución; llega a la conclusión que mientras las escritoras de la incipiente clase media se dedicaban a componer obras de literatura tales como poesía, teatro o cuentos cortos, las escritoras de la alta nobleza optaron por escribir cartas o tratados que les permitían ahondar y participar en los crisis políticas de la época.

Palabras clave: Escritoras españolas; Estratos sociales de la mujer; Géneros literarios; Tratados políticos; Epistolarios

Sumario: Women’s literary production. Women writers’ social categories. Convent writings. Secular women writers. Writing women’s lives. The middle class and minor nobility. The paucity of aristocratic women writers. Non-fictional writings by aristocratic women: correspondence. Aristocratic women’s concerns. References

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Recent feminist research on early modern women writers has successfully identified many previously unknown female authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, increasing the number of known authors to over five hundred. One of the most helpful sources for continued research in this field is the Spanish database project, Biblioteca de Escritoras Españolas (BIESES), whose task it has been to systematize and catalog women's writings from 1450 to 1800 in order to acknowledge them as an integral part of Spanish literary and cultural history². The findings generated by the database demonstrate the extent of the kinds of genres these women selected, as well as the dates when and the locations where they tended to write. The database also includes documents, correspondence, and other archival information found about the women. Among the many advantages offered by the database is that it offers scholars a broad range of sources from which to study the authors more thoroughly than solely by their writings, which may not reveal much biographical information about them. Because the database also incorporates secondary research about the writers and their works—books and articles in different fields and from different geographical sources—it provides a wide international frame of knowledge in which to search that is generally possible for individual scholars working in libraries and archives³. The knowledge now available, whether through the database or by individual searches, has already launched numerous studies that have enriched our understanding of early modern women, and opened up approaches to the texts and their writers until recently not considered possible.

Women's literary production

The information gathered from these sources, therefore, allows us to recognize the various literary genres in which women wrote: short story, poetry, and theater, certainly, but they also wrote biographies, autobiographies and treatises, along with correspondence⁴. As only one example, writings by nuns—one of the most substantial contributions to the early modern literary field—can be dated, located, and compared to those by nuns who professed in other orders; their styles may be analyzed and their authors identified more fully. Because nuns' writings followed those of Teresa of Ávila, their imitation liberated them from the usual norm against women taking up the pen⁵. The amount of poetry produced by nuns in convents is impressive, as can be seen through the numbers of *cancioneros* compiled by convents⁶.

² Baranda, N.: "Studying Early Modern Women Writers: The Digital Humanities Turn", *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13.1 (Fall 2018), pp. 163-171. Baranda initiated the project in 2004 and brought together an ongoing work group of researchers with the purpose of updating Serrano y Sanz's *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritoras españolas* (1903-1905). She continues to lead the project, which has expanded to include analyses of primary and secondary works, a journal, and other analytical approaches to women's writings. See <https://www.bieses.net/en/>.

³ The BIESES data base currently includes some 12,000 items, mostly women writers' biographies and works. These contents allow us to situate the women in particular locations and times.

⁴ For the most recent compilation of research on women's writings, see Baranda, N. and Cruz, A. J. (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to Early Modern Spanish Women Writers*, New York, Routledge, 2018. I will refer to its individual chapters on genres in this article.

⁵ Baranda, N.: *Cortejo a lo prohibido: lectoras y escritoras en la España moderna*, Madrid, Arco, 2005, p. 137.

⁶ For religious poetry, see Schlau, S.: "Body, Spirit, and Verse: Reading early modern women's religious poetry", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 103-115.

Poetry by secular women, either collected separately or inserted in numerous publications, also offers the opportunity of comparing their appropriation of male authors' poetry, which until recently formed Spain's poetic canon⁷. Themes for women poets frequently centered on familial relations, although surprisingly little attention is given to mothers. Brothers, however, earned a place in the poetry by Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán (1618-1684) as well as by Leonor de la Cueva (s.XVII-1705)⁸. While some women remained within the personal and familial sphere when writing, secular women who participated in literary academies reveals the specific social practices that women from particular geographical spaces engaged in. As María Carmen Marín Pina notes, for women to take part in public meant becoming socially involved by moving beyond the confinement of the family and striving for commercial recognition as writers, so most of their published work circulated in pamphlets⁹.

Longer modes of narrative writing were also practiced by women, who were familiar with the Italianate genre of the *novelle*. To date, five names are the most cited in this category: Beatriz Bernal (c.1501-c.1562/1586), the only woman writer whom we know to have penned a chivalric novel; María de Zayas y Sotomayor (1590-1661); Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea (1602-1685); Mariana de Carvajal y Saavedra (1620-1670); and Leonor de Meneses (1640-1664)¹⁰. Of the five, Zayas is the best known; her two volumes of ten short stories each competed in popularity with Cervantes's exemplary novels. Theater, also, was a genre that some women selected; until recently, their plays –and the playwrights themselves– were little known. Five names stand out in this genre as well: Feliciano Enríquez de Guzmán (1569-1644); Ana Caro Mallén de Soto (1590-1652); Angela de Azevedo (1600-1644); Leonor de la Cueva; and María de Zayas¹¹. We still do not know whether some of the plays were staged or whether they were meant to be closet plays, to be read in a private residence.

Women writers' social categories

What we may learn from the database and other research, and what becomes evident by focusing on their works as well as on other documents and archival sources, is the significance of the women writers' social status or condition, which conflates both so-

⁷ See Martos, M.: "The Poetic Voice," in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 135-152; Fox, G.: *Subtle Subversions. Reading Golden Age Sonnets by Iberian Women*. Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2008.

⁸ Fox, G.: "The Familial Lyric", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (nota 4), pp. 271-283. See also Borrachero Mendibil, A. and McLaughlin, K. (eds.): *Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán: Obra poética*, Mérida, Editora Regional de Extremadura, 2010.

⁹ Osuna, I.: "Literary Academies and Poetic Tournaments", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (nota 4), pp. 153-167; Marín Pina, M. C.: "Public Poetry", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 205-218.

¹⁰ Armon, S.: "Novels and Narratives", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 169-185. See also her *Picking Wedlock: Women and the Courtship Novel in Spain*, Lanham, MD Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. Most recently, Zayas's two collections have been edited together by Olivares, J.: *María de Zayas y Sotomayor. Honesto y entretenido sarao (primera y segunda parte)*, Zaragoza, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2017, 2 vols. For Bernal, see Gagliardi, D.: *Urdiendo ficciones. Beatriz Bernal, autora de caballerías en la España del s. XVI.*, Zaragoza, Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2010; for Ana Abarca de Bolea, see Campo Guiral, M. A.: *Devoción y fiesta en la pluma barroca de Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea: estudio de la Vigilia y Octavario de San Juan Bautista*, Huesca, Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses, 2007.

¹¹ Soufas, T. (ed.): *Women's Acts: Plays by Women Dramatists of Spain's Golden Age*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1997.

cial hierarchy –high nobility, lower nobility, middle and lower class –with social categories, the latter usually divided into four: maiden, married, widow, and nun¹². Few scholars make more than a passing comment on the family connections and lineage of female authors, yet in the early modern period, social origins were a crucial means of identifying one’s self, both psychologically and within society. Because social classes also reflected women’s literacy level, their writing skills, beyond their ability to read, were typically a result of their education. Given that the majority of women who wrote in early modern Spain were professed nuns, they fall into a broader category than other women writers. Most convents harbored non-noble women whose education was limited to religious practices and domestic tasks; conventual poetry, therefore, tended to follow popular secular models such as ballads and *coplas*¹³. However, nuns who played important roles in convents continued to educate themselves by reading spiritual writings and hearing priests’ sermons. Even though she was not from a noble family, the founder of the Recollected Augustinian order and prioress of the Convent of the Encarnación patronized by Queen Margaret of Austria, Sor Mariana de San José (1568-1638) wrote extensively in highly cultured language on biblical and other mystical treatises¹⁴. Another nun whose prolific writings belie a relatively uneducated, albeit deeply religious background was Sor María Jesús de Ágreda (1602-1665), known for her bilocation, her relationship through correspondence with Philip IV (there are over 300 letters extant of each), and for the Marian text, *La mística ciudad de Dios*¹⁵.

Convent writings

One nun who distinguished herself as a member of the Aragonese nobility was Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea, the daughter of Martín Abarca de Bolea y Castro, Baron of Siétamo and Count of Almunias and Ana de Mur. Born in Naples, her father was a poet and humanist who translated several works from Latin and Italian into Spanish. Ana Francisca entered the royal Cistercian convent of Casbas (Huesca) at three years of age, where she received a humanist education that allowed her to participate through correspondence in Aragonese intellectual circles. She professed as a nun in the same convent and held the post of abbess for several years. Ana Francisca’s writings reflect her religious vocation; her first book narrated the lives of fourteen holy Cistercian nuns, which she then followed with the life of Saint Susan, Princess of Hungary. The book for which she is most known is *Vigilia and Octavario de san Juan Baptista*, a collection of songs, poems, and stories narrating the celebrations of a group of courtiers on the riverbank the week before St. John’s feast day¹⁶. In a letter

¹² For a discussion of social hierarchies, see Coolidge, G.: “Aristocracy and the Urban Elite”, in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 15-26. On social categories as described in medieval literature, see Ortega-Sierra, S.: “Discursos pre-sociológicos: Sobre algunas clasificaciones femeninas en la Edad Media”, *Lemir*, 16 (2012), pp. 301-328.

¹³ Schlau, in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 125-126. Schlau also discusses convent *cancioneros* in other languages, such as French and Catalan.

¹⁴ Muñoz, L.: *Vida de la Venerable Madre Mariana de San Joseph, fundadora de la Recolectión de las monjas Augustinas*. Madrid, 1645. See also Díez Rastrilla, J.: *Obras completas de la Madre Mariana de San José*. Madrid, Maior, 2014.

¹⁵ Colahan, C.: *The Visions of Sor María de Ágreda: Writing, Knowledge and Power*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1994.

¹⁶ Olivares, J. and Boyce, S. E. (eds.): *Tras el espejo la musa escribe: Lírica femenina de los Siglos de Oro*. Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1993, pp. 391-433.

to an Aragonese intellectual, she explains her annotations to her works as “corroborating everything with Latin authorities, whether theologians or philosophers” and that she plans to dedicate the lives of the nuns to Mariana, the daughter of Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand of Austria, with whom she was in close contact¹⁷.

Secular women writers

Although biographical details are still not available for many women writers, in numerous cases their family origins are now coming to light. Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán, for example, was a member of the minor nobility of Llerena, an important town of Extremadura. Independently wealthy, she never married, but left her inheritance to her brothers, who were in the military¹⁸. And thanks to research by Sharon Voros, we now know that the signed name of the poet and playwright Leonor de la Cueva is Leonor de la Rúa Cueva y Silva, that she was married, and owned an extensive library¹⁹. Her husband, Baltasar Blázquez de Frías, and his brother Juan Blázquez Salazar solicited proof of their *hidalguía*²⁰. Like Ramírez de Guzmán, she was also from the minor nobility, from the important town of Medina del Campo, but isolated from court. Of María de Zayas, very little is still known, despite the immense popularity of her exemplary novels. Her biographical puzzle, as Margaret Greer calls it, has yet to be entirely deciphered, although we know that her father, Fernando de Zayas, was a career military officer, an infantry captain at the service of the Count of Lemos and served in Naples, where she might have lived and familiarized herself with Italian *novelle*²¹. Deanna Mihaly comments that she took advantage in her short stories of the marked differences in social classes, writing primarily for the nobility²².

A poet, playwright, and short-story writer, Zayas was active among Madrid’s literary academies and was lauded by male writers such as Lope de Vega and Alonso de Castillo Solórzano, who called her the “Sybil of Madrid”²³. Both Zayas and the female playwright Ana Caro de Mallén were mentioned in *vejámenes*; the first in a contest organized in 1643 by the Academy of Santo Tomás in Barcelona, and the second, in the literary celebration held for Carnival in 1638 at the Palace of the Buen

¹⁷ Serrano y Sanz, M.: “Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea”, *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritoras españolas, desde el año 1401 al 1833*, vol. 1, Madrid, Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1903. Letter to Dr. Andrés de Uztaaroz, May 27, 1649, 3.

¹⁸ Borrachero Mendibil, A.: “Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán y la construcción literaria de la subjetividad barroca”, *Letras Femeninas*, 35.1 (Summer 2009), pp. 85-104.

¹⁹ Voros, S.: “Leonor’s Library: The Last Will and Testament of Leonor de la Cueva y Silva”, in Gasta, C. M. and Domínguez, J. (eds.): *Hispanic Studies in Honor of Robert L. Fiore*, Newark, DL, Juan de la Cuesta, 2009, pp. 497-510. For an analysis of her play, see Cruz, A. J.: “Counter/Acting the Body Politic: Leonor de la Cueva’s *La firmeza en la ausencia*”, *Theory Now: Journal of Literature, Critique, and Thought*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 121-134.

²⁰ Baltasar Blázquez de Frías y Juan Blázquez Salazar, *su hermano. Con el Fiscal desta Corte y con las colaciones de la Villa de Béjar. Sobre la hidalguía que los dichos pretenden*. 1607. Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), Porcones/299 (3). Cód. 5860799-1001.

²¹ Greer, M.: *María de Zayas Tells Baroque Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men*, University Park, Penn State University Press, 2000, p. 19.

²² Mihaly, D.: “Socially Constructed, Essentially Other: Servants and Slaves in María de Zayas’s *Desengaños amorosos*”, *RLA*, 10 (1999), pp. 719-725.

²³ Castillo Solórzano, A. de.: *La garduña de Sevilla y anzueto de bolsas*, ed. Federico Ruiz Morcuende, Madrid, 1972, p. 66.

Retiro²⁴. It is not surprising that both these women would participate in academies that drew renowned authors, despite their heavily male membership, for they viewed themselves as professional writers²⁵. Nieves Baranda speaks to the friendship that developed between them: Zayas asked Caro for an introductory poem for her collection of short stories, while Castillo Solórzano depicted the two attending an academy in 1644²⁶. Although Caro wrote two plays, *El conde Partinuplés* and *Valor, agravio y mujer*, we do not know whether her plays or Zayas's one play, *La traición en la amistad*, were ever staged. Nor do we know if either woman ever married. Both Zayas and Caro wrote for public consumption; Caro was commissioned by the Seville city council and according to Barajas, is the "most outstanding example of a Spanish professional woman writer of the period"²⁷.

By contrast, Ángela de Azevedo was a Portuguese playwright, whose father, Juan de Azevedo Pereira and his second wife, Isabel de Oliveira, were well connected at court and gave their daughter a humanist education. She moved to Spain in the service of Isabel de Borbón, Philip IV's first wife, where she wrote all her plays in Spanish under the patronage of Isabel²⁸. Her plays called for stage machinery and props, and although there is no record of their having been staged, they would have been addressed to private aristocratic and royal audiences²⁹. The queen arranged for her marriage, and once her husband died, she entered a Benedictine convent with her daughter³⁰. Another Portuguese writer, Leonor de Menezes (c.1620-1664), the daughter of Fernando de Menezes, Alcaide of Castelo-Branco and Juana de Toledo, was notably a titled aristocrat by marriage to Fernando de Mascarenhas, Count of Serém; on his death, she married Jerónimo de Ataíde, VI Count of Atouguia³¹. She served as lady-in-waiting to Luisa María Francisca de Guzmán, Queen de Portugal, and wrote in Spanish under the pseudonym of Laura Mauricia³². She was known for the courtesan novel, *El desdeñado más firme*, as well as for her poems and plays³³.

²⁴ Osuna, I.: "Literary academies and poetic tournaments", Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 157.

²⁵ Olivares presents a riveting story of Zayas's professional perseverance in publishing her two collections of novels. Olivares, J.: "The Socio-editorial History of the Narrative Works of María de Zayas y Sotomayor", *eHumanista*, 35 (2017), pp. 148-174.

²⁶ Baranda, N.: "Words for Sale: Early Modern Spanish Women's Literary Economy," in Font Paz, C. and Geerdink, N. (eds.): *Economic Imperatives for Women's Writing in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2018, pp. 40-72.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 43 (her emphasis).

²⁸ Soufas, *op. cit.* (note 11), p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

³⁰ "Ángela de Azevedo", *The Biographical Dictionary of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. London, Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, vol. 4, 1844, 400.

³¹ De Sousa, A. C.: *Historia genealógica da casa real portuguesa*, vol. 11. Lisboa: Regia Officina Sylviana e da Academia Real, 1745, p. 696. Menezes's social import is corroborated by having had a funeral sermon at her exequies by Quental, B. do, *Sermam funebre nas exequias da Excellentissima Senhora D. Leonor Maria de Menezes*, Lisboa, na Officina de Henrique Valente de Oliveyra, Impressor del Rey, 1665.

³² Luisa María Francisca was a Spaniard, daughter of Juan Manuel Pérez de Guzmán, VIII Duke of Medina Sidonia, and Juana Lorenza Gómez de Sandoval y la Cerda. She married Joao II, Duke of Braganza in 1633, who was offered the throne when Portugal revolted against Spain. One of her daughters, Catherine of Braganza, would marry Charles II, King of England.

³³ For an analysis of Menezes's novel as a political allegory, see Armon, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 143-190.

Writing women's lives

From the above brief overview of Iberian women writers, we may arrive at several conclusions: one would have to be that women did not hesitate at all to devote themselves to writing in all the genres available to men, even when writing and reading by women were heavily censored. Antonio de Espinosa, for example, states that

unless your daughter is illustrious or she is made to look poorly by not knowing how to read or write, do not teach her, as such knowledge places lower-class and common women at great risk, for they will either write to or receive letters from those whom they should not, as well as open their husband's letters, and wrongly learn other writings and secrets toward which the weak and curious feminine sex leans³⁴.

However, even though many more men than women wrote and published, the numbers of women's writings, from individual poems to pamphlets, and from plays to treatises, give proof of their commitment and perseverance³⁵. Ironically, perhaps, nuns were the most shielded from censure in that their writings—in particular, their autobiographies—were frequently mandated by their confessors. Their poetry, also, generally circulated in manuscript within conventual limits. Similarly, the plays composed by women playwrights may never have been staged in public. We may also conclude that women worked closely with and for one another when writing: we have already discussed Ana Caro and María de Zayas's friendship and joint participation in academies; we must also mention the introductory sonnets that women requested from and wrote for other women, women's reading of other women's works, the books dedicated to women by women³⁶, and women's many female patrons. Writing, therefore, represented a collective activity that served to unite, support, and inspire women in the act of writing.

Still another conclusion arrived at when reviewing what we have learned of women writers' lives is that, in contrast to what has generally been assumed, most if certainly not all female authors married—some more than once—and had children. Understandably, perhaps, given the time taken up by childcare and household duties, not to mention the mortal risks to which married women were subjected by childbirth, the notion that women writers remained single or professed as nuns has long been accepted. What is clear from this sample, however, is that women were equally as devoted to writing when married as when they were single, widowed, or cloistered. What is also clear from both this sample as well as from the complete list of women writers comprised by the data base BIESES is the broad range of social

³⁴ Espinosa, A. de: *Reglas de bien vivir muy provechosas (y aun necesarias) a la republica christiana*. Cited in Cátedra, P. M. and Rojo, A. (eds.): *Bibliotecas y lecturas de mujeres, siglo XVI*, Salamanca, Instituto de Historia del Libro y de la Lectura, 2004, p. 54.

³⁵ In regard to early modern English literature, Paul Salzman notes that, while far fewer women wrote than men (an estimate of 2 per cent of all published writing was by women), a bibliography of published and unpublished items would run into the thousands. Salzman, P. (ed.): "Introduction" in *Early Modern Women's Writing: An Anthology, 1560-1700*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. ix-xxxii.

³⁶ Baranda, N.: "Women's Reading Habits: Book Dedications to Female Patrons in Early Modern Spain", in Cruz, A. J. and Hernández, R. (eds.): *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World*, Farnham, UK, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 19-39.

classes to which they belonged. The abundant literary production demonstrates the high number of women who were taught to read and write, and women's educational development was measured conjointly by their social class and their literacy³⁷.

The middle class and minor nobility

The social classes represented in women's writings tended to coalesce toward the middle class and the minor nobility; that is, women who had been taught more than merely the basic skills of reading and writing either by tutors or by their own mothers. However, girls who attended *escuelas de amigas* or one of the many convent schools with an inclination toward writing could continue to learn on their own if they had access to books, which was often the case of nuns who professed or of women with libraries belonging to their fathers or husbands. Female authors who belonged to the minor nobility do not seem to have known Latin, although their writings reveal their familiarity with the literary production that was read at the time. Royal and aristocratic women received an exceptional education, as Helen Nader states of eight female members of the illustrious Mendoza clan: "they managed, bought, and sold family property [. . .] they wrote poetry, letters, and memoirs [. . .] endowed and supervised hospitals [. . .] initiated religious reforms and engaged in political activities at the highest levels of government". Such activities required extensive literary and mathematical skills, which they no doubt continued to improve upon throughout their lives³⁸. Despite its admonishment against teaching girls to read and write, we should not underestimate Espinosa's advice in his *Reglas de bien vivir* that, by contrast, daughters who belong to illustrious families must be educated so they will not bring shame on the family.

The paucity of aristocratic women writers

And yet, of all the classes to which early modern Iberian women writers belong, those of royal and aristocratic status are the least represented. The reasons were many: from the perspective of female social roles, as Nader states, noblewomen had many responsibilities, as they could own property separate from their husbands. Most noblewomen, like royal women, were compelled to procreate, and their marriages resulted in new households that diverged from the family lineage, entailing moves and supervision of diverse properties³⁹. Their supervisory role thus extended to their lands and local towns that were part of their heredity, which often involved their dedicating themselves to charity and good works. Although they

³⁷ Cruz, A. J.: "Women's Education in Early Modern Spain", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 27-40.

³⁸ Nader, H.: "Introduction: The World of the Mendozas", in *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain: Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450-1650*, Urbana-Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp. 1-26.

³⁹ The emphasis on procreation complemented the growth of the nobility at the end of the medieval period, as noble families favored by the monarchy created proliferating cadet branches that then sought individual status separate from their major lineage. Hernández Franco, J., and Rodríguez Pérez, R.A.: "Formación y desarrollo de las casas nobiliarias castellanas (siglos XVI-XVII)", in Hernández Franco, J., Guillén Barrendero, J., Martínez Hernández, S. (eds.): *Nobilitas. Estudios sobre la nobleza y lo nobiliario en la Europa Moderna*, Murcia, Doce Calles, 2014, pp. 139-175 and pp. 143.

were frequently patrons of women writers, few were themselves writers, if we limit their writings to literature. Indeed, unlike Italian women, many of them aristocrats, who were known for their poetry and, according to Irma B. Jaffe in her classic *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune*, “aspired to make their names immortal through their poetry [and] craved to be remembered on the altar of *carta ed inchiostro*”, Iberian noblewomen wrote little and published less⁴⁰. Italian women writers shared a secular humanist culture that in great part was proscribed to the majority of Spanish women, who were much more restrained by both society and the church from assuming a public voice. Italian women received an exceptional humanist education, such as Battista Malatesta (1384- c.1458), who wrote in classical Latin; Laura Cereta (1469-1499), who learned Latin and Greek from her father, and others who applied their knowledge to social and political issues. Women who wrote in the Tuscan vernacular included Lucrezia Tornabuoni (1427-1482), the mother of Lorenzo il Magnifico, who composed mainly religious lauds of the kind popularized by Savonarola, and the court aristocrats of the Cinquecento, such as Isabella d’Este (1474-1539), Elisabetta Gonzaga (1471-1526), Veronica Gãmbara (1485-1550) and Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547)⁴¹.

This is not to say, however, that Iberian noblewomen never devoted themselves to intellectual activities. As we have seen, several dedicated their talents to the arts; the nun Ana Francisca de Bolea, along with the Portuguese playwrights Ángela de Azevedo and Leonor de Meneses, produced narratives and plays, the latter two as protegés of queens. When considering titled noblewomen, however –duchesses, marquises, and countesses– we see very few who took time to write the kind of literature that they themselves read and enjoyed in their leisure time. Indeed, most were highly educated, as Helen Nader makes clear: “Spanish aristocratic women were literate, numerate, and proficient in Latin. Furthermore, their education must have included the practical aspects of finance, law, and politics”⁴². The case of Ana de Mendoza de la Cerda, Princess of Éboli (1540-1592) is instructive: married at the early age of 12 and a mother by 17, she was tutored at home, where she had her mother’s extensive library at her disposal⁴³. Indeed, among the many books in the library of Catalina de Silva’s library could be found *La Celestina*, *Cárcel de amor*, and *Los siete libros de la Diana*, alongside eight novels of chivalry (*Tirante el Blanco*, *Amadís de Grecia*, *Amadís de Gaula*, *Palmerín de Oliva*, *Primaléon*, *Reinaldos de Montalbán*, *Florisel de Niquea*, and *El caballero de la Cruz*), all of them literary texts that women were enjoined from reading, but were extremely popular nonetheless⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ See Jaffe, I. B.: *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2002, pp. xxviii.

⁴¹ Stortoni, L. A. and Mary Prentice Lillie, M. (eds): “Introduction”, in *Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courty Ladies and Courtesans*, New York, Italica Press, 1997, pp. ix-xxviii.

⁴² Nader, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 6.

⁴³ Trevor Dadson states that the average private library comprised approximately 70 books; Catalina de Silva’s contained 288. See Dadson, T.: “The Education, Books and Reading Habits of Ana de Mendoza y de la Cerda, Princess of Éboli (1540-1592)”, in Cruz and Hernández, *op. cit.* (note 36), pp.79-102.

⁴⁴ Marín Pina, M. C.: “El público y los libros d caballerías: las lectoras”, in *Páginas de sueños. Estudios sobre los libros de caballerías castellanos*, Zaragoza, Institución ‘Fernando el Católico, 2011, pp. 349-375.

Non-fictional writings by aristocratic women: correspondence

If noblewomen's writings are extended to include non-literary documents such as letters and treatises, the field of women's writings expands accordingly, and numerous women qualify for inclusion⁴⁵. Correspondence was an important mode of communication for all women, but especially for those who needed to maintain contact, whether for business or family purposes, with their various households and with children who did not reside with them. As a direct form of address, letters offered women the opportunity to voice their own opinions, constructing their own subjectivity and setting an example for agency to other women. For instance, the widowed Catalan noblewoman, Hipólita Rois de Liori I de Montcada, Countess of Palamós (1479-1546), wrote copiously, mostly to family members and friends, but also to her business agent. In her letters to her daughter, Estefanía de Requesens (1504-1549), who had married to the Count of Miranda and resided at the Madrid court, she not only counseled her daughter on moral issues, but provided advice about parenting, health, household and business management⁴⁶. Estefanía, for her part, wrote her mother about the court, the Imperial family, and political events. Another noblewoman, Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566-1614), the niece of Francisco Hurtado de Mendoza, Marquis of Almazán and Count of Monteagudo, maintained her bonds with her aristocratic friends in Spain when she left for England through her letters. Breaking with conventional roles for women, Carvajal neither married nor professed as a nun, but instead decided to travel to England to become a self-styled missionary. She is one of the few noblewomen who not only wrote a narrative of her life—which she continued to relate through her letters—but also left a small collection of spiritual poetry⁴⁷. Her letters, of which there are close to 200 extant, are addressed mainly to her religious contacts and aristocratic friends in Spain. Through her correspondence, Carvajal creates a network that keeps her in touch and reminds her of both her spiritual political value to her contacts, as her letters to the English Jesuits in Valladolid intend to notify them of the happenings in England. Her residence in London coincided with the consequences of the Gunpowder Plot and the tightening of restrictions against Catholics. Her close relations with the Spanish ambassadors kept her abreast of the political occurrences at court, which she detailed in her letters. Carvajal also represented a source of spiritual capital to her aristocratic women friends, who sent her donations so she could survive under penurious circumstances.

Carvajal was not unique in forging transnational connections by means of letters. Other examples of women's correspondence also show that networks established by and among noblewomen took place across borders. One such example is that of Maria

⁴⁵ Numerous studies have been written on the correspondence of non-noble women, both secular and religious, and of royal women. See, among others, Martos, M. and Neira, J. (eds.): *Identidad autorial femenina y comunicación epistolar*, Madrid, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, 2018; and Galende Díaz, J. C. and Salamanca López, M. (eds.): *Epistolario de la emperatriz María de Austria*, Madrid, Nuevos Escritores, 2004.

⁴⁶ Pérez Toribio, M.: "From Mother to Daughter: Educational Lineage in the Correspondence between the Countess of Palamós and Estefanía de Requesens", in Cruz and Hernández, *op. cit.* (note 36), pp. 59-77; 60. For editions of their letters, see Guisado, M.: *Cartes intimes d'une dama catalana del segle XVI: epistolari a la seva mare la Comtessa de Palamós*, Barcelona, La Sal, 1987; and Ahumada Batlle, E. de: *Epistolari d'Hipólita Rois de Liori i d'Estefanía de Requesens (segle XVI)*. Valencia, Universitat de Valencia, 2003.

⁴⁷ Cruz, A. J. (ed.): *The Life and Writings of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza*, Toronto, Iter, University of Toronto, 2009.

Magdalena of Austria (1608-1631) when she ruled as Great Duchess of Tuscany (1621-1628) and three important figures of Philip III's court: her sister, Margaret of Austria, her niece, the Infanta María, and her cousin, the nun Margarita de la Cruz. This epistolary contact maintained with her relatives went far beyond familial concerns, however, as it was intended to ensure her position at the Tuscan court and a good future for her children.⁴⁸ The letters written by noblewomen thus demonstrate that they participated in both private and public spheres, with deep and constant awareness of social and political occurrences, and often commented on what was happening beyond national borders⁴⁹. Yet these letters were addressed to individual readers and were not intended to divulge their authors' thoughts and opinions except to their recipients. Given the command that most noblewomen had of their extensive households and of their own social roles, especially if, like Carvajal, they were without ties to a husband, it is not surprising that several titled noblewomen chose to comment publicly on current political affairs, not solely in letters, but in published treatises that revealed how profoundly they were affected by historical changes and the ways in which they attempted to correct what they saw as damaging to their social group. Two who wrote effectively on these issues were Luisa de Padilla y Manrique, Countess of Aranda (1590-1646) and María de Guevara, Countess of Escalante (c.1620-1683). Both wrote treatises that demonstrated their involvement in social and political events. Luisa de Padilla married at fifteen years of age to Antonio Jiménez de Urrea, count of Aranda, and resided in the pastoral village of Épila. Despite its peripheral location, the town provided a circle of humanist friends and relatives, some of whom had penned writings that reinforced chivalric and courtesan ideals⁵⁰.

Didactic treatises

Padilla wrote six lengthy didactic treatises that focused in the main on the comportment of the nobility⁵¹. Although most probably she had never had children herself, her

⁴⁸ Franganillo Álvarez, A.: "Intereses dinásticos y vínculos familiares. La red epistolar transnacional de la Gran Duquesa María Magdalena de Austria (1608-1631)", in García García, B., Keller, K. and Sommer-Mathis, A. (eds.): *De puño y letra: cartas personales en las redes dinásticas de la Casa de Austria*, Madrid-Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2019, pp. 173-198.

⁴⁹ For other correspondence by noblewomen, see Dadson, T. J. and Reed, H. H. (eds.): *Epistolario e historia documental de Ana de Mendoza y de la Cerda, princesa de Éboli*. Madrid-Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2013; Franganillo Álvarez, A.: "La relación epistolar entre la Gran Duquesa Cristina de Lorena y algunas nobles españolas durante la década de 1590-1620", *Arenal. Revista de Historia de las Mujeres*, 20 (2013), pp. 369-394; García Prieto, E.: "La gestión femenina del patrimonio nobiliar. Doña Teresa de Saavedra y Zúñiga, condesa de Villalonso: una aristócrata en los reinados de Felipe II y Felipe III", *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna* 41-1 (2016), pp. 209-238; and Cruz Medina, V. de: "Private Correspondence", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 287-289.

⁵⁰ The count of Aranda's ancestor, Jerónimo Jiménez de Urrea (1510-1573), translated Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and wrote a version of the novel of chivalry *El Caballero deliberado* by Olivier de la Marche and the *Diálogo de la verdadera honra militar*. See Pérez Lasheras, A.: *La literatura del reino de Aragón hasta el siglo XVI*, Zaragoza, Ibercaja-Institución Fernando el Católico, 2003.

⁵¹ For studies on Padilla, see Egido, A.: "La *Nobleza virtuosa* de la Condesa de Aranda, doña Luisa de Padilla, amiga de Gracián", *Archivo de Filología Aragonesa*, vol. 54-55 (1998), pp. 9-41; Hernández, R.: "Luisa de Padilla's *Lágrimas de la nobleza*": Vice, Moral Authority, and the Woman Writer", *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 87.7 (2010), pp. 897-914; Torremocha Hernández, M.: "Lágrimas de la nobleza" o lágrimas por la nobleza. Luisa de Padilla, condesa de Aranda y su 'reformación de nobles'", in Pérez Álvarez, M. J. and Martín García, A.

books nevertheless propose models of behavior for noble children: between 1637 and 1644, two years before her death, she wrote *La nobleza virtuosa; El noble perfecto y segunda parte de la nobleza virtuosa; Lágrimas de la nobleza; Elogios de la verdad investiva contra la mentira; Excelencias de la castidad* and *Idea de nobles y sus desempeños en aforismos*. Her first three books were not published under her own name; instead, the name of an Augustinian friar, Pedro Enrique Pastor, appears on their cover. The other three books were published under her name, since according to Carmen Peraita, the first three had escaped Philip II's rule requiring the author's name on the cover⁵². The paratext gives proof that the book was written by a woman, and Padilla's family crest on the cover revealed its noble origins. Peraita suggests that emphasizing her gender and aristocratic status without revealing her name served to allow the book's authority and truth⁵³. Indeed, Padilla had no qualms in assuming an authorial stance over her version of the genre of *speculum principis* to educate the nobility.

Padilla recognized the need to create an image of the nobility that extolled its honor, offering its service and wealth to the monarchy, but she also stressed that firstborn sons should go daily to court in order to secure benefits from the king. The twelve chapters in *Lágrimas de la nobleza* extends her reproach, in the form of tears that they shed, to nobles who commit both social and moral wrongs. She thus rebukes a series of behavioral sins that broke mainly with the societal rules that she expected of the nobility: while she first notes their lack of respect for Catholic churches, priests, and sacred images, she follows with such misconduct as their bad habit of swearing, their continuous indolence, not meeting their obligations to their children, their excessive gambling, their mistreatment of their wives, the abuse of their vassals, and their valuing only those servants who flattered them⁵⁴. Her erudition as well as her social position allowed her the same level of authority as the texts written by men, thus responding to what she perceives as a social crisis. In her first book, she decries the nobility's inherited privileges that degenerate into vices, while lauding inherent virtue rather than lineage. Yet, while she wished to return to the conservative Christian values based on obeisance to one's king and one's father and supported "masculine" virtues in order to combat men's decadent behavior, she also strove to have these values restored through practical economic means. Padilla's advice to nobles resounds with the same concerns criticizing the decadent comportment and image of noblemen in the early modern period during the so-called crisis of the aristocracy⁵⁵. Her treatises adhere to the discourses that intended to construct a new kind of nobility within the Spanish Monarchy that relied in part on restoring its chivalric values, but one that eschewed its previous excesses.

(eds.): *Campo y campesinos en la España Moderna; culturas políticas en el mundo hispano*, vol. 2, Madrid, Fundación Española de Historia Moderna, 2012, pp. 2187-2198; Malo Barranco, L.: *Nobleza en femenino: mujeres, poder y cultura en la España moderna*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2019; and Bergmann, E. L.: "Spain's Women Humanists" in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 219-235.

⁵² Peraita, C. "Circumventing Anonymity. Paratextual Strategies and the Construction of Authorship in Luisa de Padilla", *Paratesto: Rivista Internazionale* 11 (2014), pp. 69-79.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁵⁴ According to Hernández, by associating the nation's wellbeing with treatment by noblemen of their families Padilla "erases the boundaries between private and public practice", Hernández, *op. cit.* (note 51), p. 902.

⁵⁵ See the classic study of English decadence by Stone, L.: *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*, London, Clarendon Press, 1965. For Spain, see Lehfeltdt, E.: "Ideal Men: Masculinity and Decline in Seventeenth-Century Spain", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 61.2 (2008), pp. 463-494.

Perceptions of the failure of the leading classes in the seventeenth century continued through the seventeenth century. By the time of Padilla's death, Philip IV was involved in two complex wars on both Spain's borders, while his army had suffered defeat at Rocroi, France. Like Padilla, another noblewoman, María de Guevara, countess of Escalante, would author treatises on restoring Spain and "heal the infirm body of the state"⁵⁶. Unlike Padilla, however, she focused her aim more specifically on the kings and on women's public roles. As Nieves Baranda points out, she relied less on classical sources and voiced her own ideas more forcefully⁵⁷. Unlike Padilla, who remained distanced from court, Guevara led an active and well-traveled life throughout Spain, visiting her various estates; she married three times and corresponded widely, yet in direct opposition to Padilla, who recommended that nobles visit the court daily, Guevara advised men to leave the court and return to their estates⁵⁸. Guevara's relations to royalty was narrated in her written report of her journey to Vitoria, ostensibly to "kiss her majesty's [the Infanta Theresa of Austria's] hand"⁵⁹. Her audacious nature is reflected in the genealogical memorandum addressed to Philip IV in 1654, two years before his death⁶⁰. In this lengthy summary of her lineage, she details the benefits awarded her ancestors by previous monarchs, and requests that the king return them and those he had taken from her family to her, while at the same time asking him to grant her mother the equivalent of twenty thousand ducats in stocks⁶¹.

Guevara's most pressing interest, however, was her concern over the state of the Spanish government. In 1663, she published the treatise *Tratado y advertencias hecha por una mujer celosa bien de su rey y corrida de parte de España*, immediately followed in 1664 by *Desengaños de la Corte y mujeres valerosas*. The full title of her *Tratado*, in which she declares herself to be concerned on the part of Spain, makes sure to insert her from the first into the national issues. That she addressed the king directly in this treatise along with her genealogical memorandum, disproves the view that she felt she must justify her writings. As head of her numerous households, she was fully capable of reminding the king and male nobility of their political responsibilities; not the least, her concerns about the cost of the war with Portugal, directing him that he should strategize on both land and sea, recommending that Don Juan José, his illegitimate son, receive his military support, and even offering herself as a possible "Amazon" for battle. Her other treatise, *Desengaños de la Corte*, is addressed to Carlos II as a *speculum principis* in which she offers, for his instruction, a list of heroic women.

What united Luisa de Padilla and María de Guevara—and indeed, the overwhelming majority of the titled noblewomen we have discussed above—their compulsion to trans-

⁵⁶ Romero-Díaz, N.: "Women and Power", in Baranda and Cruz, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 237-252; 240.

⁵⁷ Baranda, *op. cit.* (nota 5).

⁵⁸ Guevara, M. de: *Desengaños de la Corte y mujeres valerosas*, Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE), R/4496, 1664.

⁵⁹ Romero-Díaz, N.: "Women, Space, and Power in Early Modern Spain: Luisa de Carvajal and María de Guevara", *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 11.2 (Spring 2017), pp. 42-58. For the text, see María de Guevara, M. de: *Relación de la jornada que hizo la Condesa de Escalante a la Ciudad de Vitoria a besar la mano de su Majestad*, 1660; "Appendix B, Report on the Day's Journey that the Countess of Escalante made to the City of Vitoria to kiss Her Majesty's Hand", in Romero-Díaz, N. (ed.): *María de Guevara, Warnings to the Kings, and Advice on Restoring Spain: A Bilingual Edition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 118-124.

⁶⁰ Romero-Díaz lists her numerous titles, which included that of countess of Escalante and Tahalú, viscountess of Treceño. Romero-Díaz, *op. cit.* (note 56).

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 112-117.

gress typical gendered roles, was the overriding passion and concern for their country. Padilla saw with great distress what she perceived as the decline of social and moral values at court due to the misconduct and waywardness of its courtiers and the male nobility's loss of valor. For her part, Guevara also was appalled by the wars threatening her nation's borders and men's moral failure. In the time they mustered to write their thoughts, their deep involvement and preoccupation with these pressing issues steered them from the possible distraction of writing fiction toward an attempt to intervene and give immediate warning to the men of the harsh historical realities confronting them.

Aristocratic women's concerns

Thanks to the abundant correspondence generated by aristocratic women, the portrait we perceive of them is one that focuses most of all on their negotiating at court for the personal and political benefit of their extended families, caring for their husbands' and their own households and properties, and in many cases, running transnational businesses with relatives or other persons⁶². Unlike other women, such as nuns who, while also leading regulated lives, were not responsible for a wide breadth of family and social responsibilities, most noble women who lived on the periphery of the royal court were at the center of small courts, whose day-to-day affairs necessitated most of their time and attention. Any moments of leisure, therefore, were likely to be spent on charitable works and attendance at religious ceremonies and charitable works. Their lives were thus highly structured and circumscribed by a series of continuous obligations, yet they also continued to enrich their excellent educations through readings from their extensive libraries, which housed a wide variety of texts, both literary and non-literary, and carried out important roles as literary and cultural patrons. When attempting to discern why aristocratic Spanish women did not, in the main, write literary works such as poetry, plays, novels, or short stories, as did women of the lower nobility and the middle class, what becomes obvious is that any time aristocratic women may have carved out from their demanding daily lives was, by choice, dedicated instead to non-literary writings that served primarily to promote their own interests as political players within the social system. If the middle-class and non-noble women who took up the pen did so in order to meet the challenge of attaining public visibility through the construction of an authorial self whose works circulated widely, this challenge was not at issue with aristocratic women, whose illustrious lineage allowed them to assume the function, not of generators, but of consumers and patrons of early modern literary production.

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⁶² While I am fully aware that epistolary practices are often considered literary, and that letters may certainly be analyzed through rhetorical and even aesthetic lens, my own perspective is more historicist as regards their content and function. For a different approach, see Campbell, J.D., and Larsen, A.R. (eds.): *Early Modern Women and Translational Communities of Letters*, Ashgate, 2009.

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