

Monogràfic  
«Early Modern Women's Writing: More Texts and Contexts»  
coordinat per Verònica Zaragoza Gómez



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## PRESENTATION\*

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Las escritoras son una especie extraña, difícil de visibilizar. Omitidas de las posiciones centrales del canon, desplazadas hasta sus márgenes o sencillamente borradas, su recuperación para la historia pasa primero por la obtención de datos. Sin embargo, en su aparente excepcionalidad y aislamiento, poco significan si no podemos articularlos como parte de un panorama cultural que les dé coherencia. Si cuando disponemos de información abundante, los géneros, estilos, temas, ediciones, mecenazgos son algunos de los elementos tradicionales en la historia literaria que nos permiten crear sentido, cuando estamos ante una escasez mezquina, es necesario aceptar que después de la exhumación trabajosa, la proximidad cronológica y geográfica, el ambiente o los usos de la época forman parte imprescindible de su interpretación. Como en la arqueología, son los vestigios los que sirven para dibujar el mapa de lo que pudo ser, trazando líneas sutiles que alguna vez los unieron.

N. Baranda (2016: 46)<sup>1</sup>

As Nieves Baranda's words suggest in this quote, invisibility, marginalization and displacement from the literary and cultural canon, as well as exceptionality and isolation from the cultural scene define the status that the traditional historiography had given to the contributions of past women writers; «un món on se suposava que l'acte creador només era masculí» (Roig 1991: 69); due in part to the dominant androcentric perspective, the existence of feminine voices had rarely been considered. This situation partly explains why until the last decades (and with minor exceptions), the active role that some women clearly played as cultural mediators (agency) was neglected and failed to have its due place in the corpus of female texts of the western literary tradition.

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1. The fact that this work mainly addresses the 16<sup>th</sup> century is no barrier to considering it as a general description of the rest of the period.

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Buried under a layer of centuries of neglect and inadvertence, and without fitting into the criteria employed in historical and literary periodization, which have focused too much on male contributions, the cultural production of early modern women writers generally did not have a significant recognition. Certainly, this situation is partly caused by the weak social authority of women, which not only had a negative effect on the coetaneous reception of past female authors, but also continues to influence the perspective of the current academic and historiographic discourse.

However, all over Europe this framework has recently been challenged and strongly contested in the past decades (Cruz & Hernández 2011; Poska, Couchman & McIver 2013, and others). Recent studies on female authors through 1800 have benefited from numerous initiatives that have been erecting a building of confidence.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, this is due to the work of literary archaeology that has assumed a gender perspective among its goals and which has also provided new interpretative tools to address the works of early modern women writers. This original viewpoint projected from the academic world as a sign of new times has coalesced with the emergence of a deep desire for knowledge coming from our societies, which are increasingly eager to know more about the life of our female ancestors and their real cultural contributions. This special issue precisely aims to offer some suggestions for the difficult but essential task of documenting women writers of the early modern period and her texts, mainly based on the contextualization of some of the spaces that were suited for female creativity, which hopefully will undermine some clichés. Furthermore, this is achieved by presenting the results of great specialists in the recovery of texts and women writers, who also put forward novel and inspiring ideas.



Along with other factors that show an intentional and capricious negligence (e.g. the androcentric vision), one of the most important causes of the marginality of early women's writing has undoubtedly been our ignorance about her works. In turn, this situation was mainly due to the dispersal of texts, our lack of knowledge of their location and to textual loss, since few of them had been edited and made available to a more general audience. As the works presented in this special issue reveal, access

2. For the Hispanic context, see the excellent guide recently published by Baranda & Cruz (2018a / 2018b), which exempts me from giving a detailed bibliography in this introduction. The volume brings together great specialists and many works, thematically organized according to the religious or secular status of the female authors and taking into account the different cultural and religious areas in which they participate and their literary genres.

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to much of the modern corpus is both random and complicated, partly because most of the authors of that time wrote their works in monastic enclosures, especially in the Hispanic context (Zarri & Baranda 2011; Baranda & Marín 2014; Herrero 2018; and Zaragoza 2013). In addition, the texts that have been preserved (note that many women requested the destruction of their work before they died; indeed, many burned them at the request of confessors or other ecclesiastical superiors) are nowadays kept by communities (as they did in the past) that live in enclosed monasteries or have been grouped together with other convents. Another difficulty worth mentioning is that even when all these problems have been addressed and the researchers get access to the texts (and, in that respect, I have to admit that our visits to convents are welcomed with great generosity and affection by the nuns that keep these archives), we usually ignore most of the contextual data required to interpret them and have very little information about their authors, due to the lack of documentation.

Accordingly, in this context studies on the recovery, interpretation and reassessment of women texts and authorships reveal an incomplete cartography of cultural participation and activity of early modern women, since the information recovered from historical research, often transmitted indirectly, is still meager. This is one of the main problems that have to overcome those who have tried to address this issue: the scarcity of data that can be gathered from each of the women writers to build their literary profiles is a difficult obstacle that causes that many of them still remain unknown (except the most renowned authors). In fact, in drawing the «mapa de lo que pudo ser, trazando líneas sutiles que alguna vez los unieron», as Baranda's introductory words suggest, at the moment we can only build a web of knowledge and cultural relationships that often derives from indirect inferences rather than clear evidence, and which affects the most famous authors as well as those who had a less significant work. All in all, this explains why female authorship during the Early Modern Age (and even at earlier periods) remains as one of the fields of literary historiography with more gaps (despite the remarkable progress that has been made) and that, precisely for that reason, we expect research in this area to rapidly grow and to provide new and interesting insights in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

Given the fragmentary and indirect nature of most of the evidence gathered in this area, different strategies have been adopted to examine the contributions of

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3. Two recent projects that will surely contribute to make progress in this area are *WINK, Women's Invisible Ink: Trans-Genre Writing and the Gendering of Intellectual Value in Early Modernity* under the supervision of Dr Carme Font Paz (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and *CIRGEN: Circulating Gender in the Global Enlightenment. Ideas, Networks, Agencies*, whose main researcher is Dr Mònica Bolufer Peruga (Universitat de València).

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women in the early modern literary culture. In this respect, a useful analogy could be established with a strategy that, in the field of the philosophy of science, some scholars have described as an *omnivorous methodology*.<sup>4</sup> In the same manner that many animals improve their chances of survival by diversifying the kinds of food they ingest, researchers in our field have to become omnivores, diversifying methodologies and taking advantage of multidisciplinary approaches that enable us to maximize results.

Thus, to overcome the tendency to neglect the contributions of women authors in our literary history, different methodologies have been converging that concern archival science, literary sociology, historical documentation, gender studies, critical edition, the history of religions and spirituality, social history and history of mentalities, ... This work is based on three general aspects: textual interpretation, the reconstruction of the historical context and in most cases feminist literary criticism. Likewise, some indispensable tools such as databases, websites, digital editions or dictionaries provided by the innovative digital humanities projects<sup>5</sup> are an excellent complement to traditional resources (anthologies, informative or critical editions, dictionaries, special issues, edited books...) that had not been able to give clear answers to some of the questions that had not been able to give clear answers to some of the questions raised by scholars: taking into account the adverse sociocultural context that disavowed them as active agents, which women could use the pen and what kind of texts did they leave us? What strategies did they employ to exercise their intellectual capacities? Which were the relationships that they used to reach the public discourse? How many of these works were published and how were they received by

4. «Historical scientists are methodological omnivores: they maximize the epistemic potential of fragmentary remains by constructing specialized epistemic tools. [...] an essential part of historical hypotheses' support comes from convergence from multiple evidence streams. Where such consilience matters, and it undoubtedly does when evidence is fragmentary, generating such lines of evidence is imperative» (Currie 2015).

5. The volume 13/1 (Fall 2018) of *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* contains a forum on «Rethinking Methodologies for Early Modern Women's Studies» with an article entitled «Studying Early Modern Women Writers: The Digital Humanities Turn», by Nieves Baranda (Baranda 2018). A very interesting special issue on that topic just appeared entitled «Early Modern Women's Writing and Transmission», edited by Paul Salzman (*Women's Writing*, 26/1, 2019).

6. Although it is impossible to mention here all initiatives that have been addressing these issues, I would like to highlight some Iberian projects that have decisively contributed to a positive change in the study of early modern women writing: «Diccionari Biogràfic de Dones» (Generalitat de Catalunya / Consell Balear / Xarxa Lluís Vives) [<http://www.dbd.cat/>]; «Escritoras españolas» (Biblioteca Virtual Cervantes); «ESCRITORAS», an on-line catalogue of Portuguese Women Writers active prior to 1900 [<http://www.escritoras-em-portugues.eu/>]; «Catálogo de Santas Vivas» (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) [<http://catalogodesantasvivas.visionarias.es/>], «Biblioteca Virtual de Investigación Duoda» (BVID) (Universitat de Barcelona) [<http://www.ub.edu/duoda/bvid/>].

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their contemporaries? Can we identify the geographic area in which these works were produced and distributed and the time they were written?...

Recently, a significant amount of effort has been devoted to filling these gaps and making progress in cataloging, contextualizing and documenting a list of works that is becoming more precise and complete. Indeed, the recovery and study of women authorship of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries have become a very important line of study in Europe, that has brought to light new and exciting academic projects.<sup>7</sup> Several works carried out in the last decades in the Catalan and Iberian areas as well as in the European context, have revealed a significant number of texts written by women, which should be regarded as something more than the mere materiality that they represent: taken one by one, they allow us to look at the whole picture from a new point of view enabling us to overcome the silence that, over the centuries, the traditional historiography had imposed on the women writers that existed before 1800.

Certainly, in the Hispanic context we already had an invaluable guide that motivated us to keep looking for female texts: Manuel Serrano y Sanz's catalog, *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritoras españolas desde el año 1401 al 1833* (Serrano y Sanz 1903-1905). From this biobibliographical work derive all research projects that seek to delve into the subject and strive for exhaustiveness, among which I would like to mention the research project BIESES (acronym for *Bibliografía de Escritoras Españolas*) that carries out an outstanding task of cataloging and exhaustive documentation of female authors and that has been growing since 2004 under the supervision of Nieves Baranda (UNED) and recently of María D. Martos (UNED).<sup>8</sup> With the aim of systematizing all knowledge that has been gathered so far on early women writing, BIESES promotes a rigorous and meticulous research without neglecting the dissemination of results, and has been able to publish almost half thousand author names from the period that goes from 1450 to 1800. Along the same lines, one of the great virtues of this project is to have provided to the general public and to the academic

7. Some interesting research projects in progress are *Poder, espiritualidad y género* (PI: María Morrás) [<https://www.upf.edu/web/poder-espiritualidad-genero>]; *RECIRC: Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550-1700* (PI: Marie Louise Coolahan) [<http://recirc.nuigalway.ie/>]; *The Women Writers Project* (Northeastern University) [<https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/>]; *Early Modern Women's Research Network* (Newcastle University in Australia) [<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/emwrn/>], and *MAUSTRIA. Las mujeres en la Casa de Austria (1526-1567). Estudio documental* (PI: Júlia Benavent) [<http://www.maustria.info/>]; *Women's Early Modern Letters Online* [WEMLO] (PI: James Daybell and Kim McLean-Fiander) [[http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?page\\_id=2595](http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?page_id=2595)], or *Reassembling the Republic of Letters* (PI: Howard Hotson and Thomas Wallnig) [<http://www.republicofletters.net/>] in the field of epistolography.

8. See <https://www.bieses.net/>.

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community a database with free and open access references. The main objective of the project is to provide scholars with effective tools to locate primary sources (printed texts or manuscripts), as well as secondary bibliography, that in some cases is offered through digital platforms. Without doubt, it has revealed an unimaginable universe of previously unknown female works, authorships and life experiences.



In order to improve our understanding of early modern women writers, I present this special issue entitled «Early Modern Women's Writing: More Texts and Contexts», which is an attempt to provide a faithful picture of some of the latest research projects and trends that deal with female literature of this period. All works express a double dimension of study: on the one hand, textual exhumation and, on the other, the use of new approaches to analyze the texts that appear here, most of which were unknown or little explored. These works are framed in the context of the Iberian and European literatures.

The essay written by professor Anne J. Cruz, «Women Writers of Early Modern Spain: A Feminist Overview» opens this special issue. It offers a panoramic view of Hispanic writers of this period and a good synthesis of the progress that has been made in our understanding of the landscape of early modern women's writing. Taking the prestigious figure of María de Zayas as a starting point, the paper seeks to provide convincing evidence supporting the idea that there was a great variety of texts written and published by Hispanic women during the 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> centuries. To achieve this goal, Cruz aims to give an answer to some of the questions that I raised above (which are mostly put forward by feminist studies). She examines how the intersection of the influence of the historical context, the social origin of the authors and the educational dimension and literacy become key factors for some women to write. She also explains why these works are attached to a particular typology and how they significantly contributed to a wide variety of genres. She starts from different levels of cultural literacy that women could acquire at the time and from the writing contexts in a secular or profane environment in order to frame the cultural production of some great figures religious and secular authors of the Hispanic world. The analysis of the secular works of María de Zayas or Ana Caro, the most famous writers of that period in the Castilian area, leads to a thought that can be applied to all production in general: «The significance of women's writings can best be appreciated by perceiving the authors not only as individuals or anomalous players, but as part of a far more expansive panorama of historical agency». Lastly, she deals with what she calls



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«Political Writings», which are texts that belong to the large and varied category of so called ‘ego-documents’<sup>9</sup> that show the capacity of women to act and intervene on their immediate social and political environment.

The second piece of this monograph is «La memòria inèdita del Carmel descalç femení a la Corona d’Aragó: biografies i cròniques històriques» written by the historian and archivist of the Discalced Carmelites of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, M. Mercè Gras Casanovas. Working on completely unknown materials that can also be classified as ego-documents, which were preserved in some convents of the territories of the ancient Crown of Aragon (Catalonia, Valencian Country, the Balearic Islands and Aragon), Gras investigates the model of biographical and autobiographical writing and the historical narrative of the foundational processes in the Discalced Carmel Order. As she explains, the *Libro de la vida* and *Las fundaciones* by Teresa de Jesús had crucial impact on this kind of works, which are recently being studied with great attention (Marcos Sánchez 2018). Gras focuses especially on the role of religious historians of these regions, through the writing of obituaries for other dead nuns, with whom they had cohabited in the monastic enclosure. In addition, she documents practices of historical creation in each of these convents, which originally had the function of disseminating the good examples of religious women (in the form of «cartes d’edificació») and providing biographical material for the future processes of beatification or canonization. Her research shows that the biographies provided by these obituaries are a rich material of the Discalced Carmelite and a first-order piece of evidence for the study of female writing, which nonetheless has not been sufficiently explored, despite its important value. According to the scholar, «constitueixen el conjunt més rellevant de biografies femenines escrites per dones i de major continuïtat cronològica que pot trobar-se, ja que per a algunes comunitats es conserven des dels primers temps de la fundació fins a l’actualitat». As she finally recognizes, «Aquesta magna col·lecció de biografies sobrepassaria de llarg el miler, i constitueix un corpus d’estudi únic». One of the aspects highlighted by this work is that it shows that some biographies written independently or collected in the «elogis de difuntes» (obituary books) of the communities were finally published by male historians, who appropriated the authorship of these works that were actually written by nuns that belonged to the community.

9. This literature receives a different terminology depending on the cultural tradition. To know more, see Jané, Miralles & Fernández (2013), and Jané & Poujade (2015).

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The third essay of the special issue, entitled «Escrituras femeninas de su vida (Francia, siglos XVI-XVIII)», and written by Sylvie Mouysset, professor at the Université Toulouse 2 (France), explores the intervention of French women in the cultural world before the Revolution (1789), with the production of ego-documents.<sup>10</sup> The study shows how the view of women production of memoirs in this country has been reassessed due to the exhumation of a fascinating inventory of texts that had a private motivation; research on these works opens a very interesting avenue for future research. In addition to the content that they reveal, they are fundamental sources because they represent the appropriation of the written word in the private discourse by women coming from different social statuses throughout the Early Modern Age. Mouysset emphasizes the wide variety of forms and formats of these works: «periódicos, memorias, correspondencia, libros de amistad, pero también aquí se recogen registros de cuentas y documentos familiares, sin olvidar las hojas sueltas que contienen recetas, largas listas de remedios...». Regardless of the format of the texts, their extension and their content, they are a privileged literary and historical expression, since they allow us to access the inner and subjective world of some women and they enable us to document certain cultural practices of them. These ego-documents have an undeniable literary value and historical weight and they provide us with access to a world of feelings, subjectivity and everyday experiences through a female voice. This is shown by some of the projects of cataloging and textual edition<sup>11</sup> and from the wide bibliography that they provide, which allow us to track the interests and daily practices of the authors of that period.

We should not forget that in contrast to the aridity of the norms and the socially established customs (Gascón 2012), these ego-documents provide a more colorful perspective on the actions of the main figures, which is narrated from an intimate point of view. The work of Mouysset stresses that they represent a sample of how some women of that time, in particular those who had access to education as a sign of middle or high class, found in the pen a fundamental instrument of action. In the case of bourgeois women or women coming from wealthy families, writing represented a symbol of self-affirmation of class because it served them to manage their economic and patrimonial assets; they possessed accounting books or others kinds of personal reports that they employed to manage issues related to heritage conservation and

10. See the special issue of *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, «Écrire au quotidien», 35 (2012), and especially the introduction (Lacoue-Labarthe & Mouysset 2013); Miralles (2013) and Bolufer (2019).

11. In the Catalan area, the project *Memòria Personal* [<http://www.memoriapersonal.eu/>] provides a database with some female texts.

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other day-to-day affairs. Other women, daughters or wives of artisans, merchants or liberal professionals who employed the pen in carrying out the professional activities of their relatives, learned and developed this ability in the family business, generally in the shadow of their parents or husbands; in some cases, they even supervised the business in their absence. Mouysset provides many other interesting women's writing that complement these cases, which are the most general and better known by current historiography.

The last article of the special issue is «*Cancionero Poetry As Religious Practice: The Valladolid Discalced Carmelite Convent's Libro de romances y coplas*», written by Stacey Schlau, professor at the West Chester University of Pennsylvania. This scholar specialized in the poetry of the Discalced Carmelite Order delves into the spiritual and instructional value of the well-known *cancionero* of the Valladolid Discalced Carmelite convent, which has an important community function, and which was mostly copied by the nun Isabel del Sacramento. The *Libro de romances y coplas del Carmelo de Valladolid* is a compilation of 132 lyrical pieces (and some copies) and a last text in prose, which dates from earlier than 1614. Despite it is being anonymous (like the rest of preserved *cancioneros* that belonged to the Discalced Carmelite Order), some pieces are attributed to the poetic pen of the sisters Cecilia del Nacimiento and María de San Alberto, who possessed great erudition. Since this manuscript was studied and edited by García de la Concha & Álvarez Pellitero (1982), Arenal & Schlau, S. (1989 [2012]), and later by Ugofsky-Méndez (2011, 2014), it has become one of the best known pieces of the Order, along with others that have been studied and edited (Hanna 2012; Zaragoza 2016) or that are being analyzed by current studies (e.g. the *Cancioneros* from Medina de Campo or Vic).

These manuscripts that were preserved in different enclosed convents of the Order had a cohesive function and have a thematic connection with the presence of recurring poetic cycles, linked to daily life and to the liturgical calendar, and mainly created by religious women. They contain verses that have many functions: to solemnify some celebrations, especially Christmas, to celebrate the fact that new nuns entered the convent or their professions and other day-to-day events, which are linked to the most popular and traditional functions of verses: *coplas*, *coplillas*, *villancicos*, *romances*, *canciones*, *seguidillas*.... Schlau's study focuses on characterizing the poems of three thematic blocks of the manuscript through the literary analysis of the poetic pieces that are part of the Christmas celebration, the ceremony of taken vows and the practice of internal spirituality. Definitely, this work contributes to a better understanding of the poetic tradition of the Order, which, as the specialists have emphasized, «guarda

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con ejemplar fidelidad las mismas características de fondo, de símbolo y aun a veces de expresión poética que la poesía de Teresa de Jesús y Juan de la Cruz» (Emeterio de Jesús María 1949: 7).

At this point, it goes without saying that the work done so far by multiple hands and the articles that are published in this special issue contribute to redrawing the map of cultural relations that includes women as active subjects and reflects the dynamics of a greater female participation in the cultural landscape of this period: as the authors of their texts, as readers (sometimes occasional, other times passionate) or as essential agents of some works (written by men or women) that, without their patronage, would not have been published. If we analyze one-by-one the textual footprints left by our ancestors since the first period of printing in the Hispanic area, one of the most recurring feelings is that as we move back to earlier centuries, the earlier the period studied, the fewer female authors are represented. Despite the greater attraction for cultural literacy of women from the beginning of the sixteenth century onwards, it is clear that the obstacles they encountered in the process of printing conditioned their access to the print. The crucial change took place in 1588, when the pen of Teresa de Jesús opened a window of optimism and inaugurated a new and fruitful period of great opportunities for the visibility of female writing, as she became a positive model for many other female writers.

As the works contained in this special issue show, each from its own point of view, during the Early Modern Age, in Europe, the domestic space and the enclosed space became the main physical spaces where women could unleash their literary creations unrestrainedly, as opposed to the public sphere, which represented the male power and knowledge that severely limited their chances of publishing their works in print. Nonetheless, in many cases women were able to break these walls and they managed to spread their voices with a strength that can still be heard in our times.

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