

I, Elena de la Cruz: Heresy and Gender in Mexico City, 1568

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Résumé de l'article

En juillet 1568, une religieuse dénonça l'inquisition épiscopale de Mexico. Elena de la Cruz, membre du prestigieux couvent de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción et de l'une des familles les plus importantes de la ville, fut alors accusée d'hérésie pour avoir proposé des limites aux prérogatives du pape et à celles de la hiérarchie catholique, l'archevêque de Mexico compris.

Dans le contexte de réforme et de crise religieuse de l'époque, les propos hérétiques d'Elena détenaient une large signification. Certaines notions abordées par la religieuse avaient des relents luthéranisme. Plus encore, elle paraissait refuser l'habileté du concile de Trente à accomplir un programme de réforme par lequel les monastères de femmes passeraient sous contrôle masculin. De plus, Montúfar tentait de placer le clergé régulier sous la gouvernance de l'épiscopat, autant d'efforts que menaçaient les croyances d'Elena.

Cet article avance que la religieuse se trouvait à trahir les rôles sociaux de sexe contemporains, non seulement en ayant l'audace d'affronter des points de doctrine, mais encour parce qu'elle lisait des ouvrages interdits et qu'elle tentait de découvrir sa propre voie vers le salut. L'Église de la fin du XVI^e siècle suspectait sur le champ toute femme qui empruntait des directions. En Espagne, religieuses et laïques avaient payé chèrement pour ces erreurs. Cependant, à l'encontre de plusieurs de ces religieuses hérétiques, Elena abandonna ses propositions presque aussitôt qu'elles furent questionnées par son abbesse. De même, elle ne montra aucun courage de conviction devant les inquisiteurs mâles. Il n'en demeure pas moins que les accusations formelles portées contre elle enclanchèrent un processus méticuleux de prosécution. En poursuivant ainsi le procès, Montúfar tenta d'étouffer l'insubordination féminine avant qu'elle ne gagne la reste du couvent.

Si le fait d'être une femme contribua à rendre Elena dangereuse aux yeux de la hiérarchie catholique, c'est aussi ce qui l'aida à sauver sa peau. Ses avocats purent utiliser le topos de la femme faible, ignorante et mal guidée pour rendre compte de ses égarements hors du sentier de l'ordre et de l'obéissance. Ainsi, les mêmes idéologies hispaniques liées aux rapports sociaux de sexe qui permettaient de présenter le crime d'Elena en termes de trahison et de désordre permirent la réintégration de la religieuse dans la société. Le procès d'Elena fournit l'opportunité d'examiner les ambiguïtés des prescriptions liées au sexe et les façons dont on amenait la population à s'y conformer. Ce sont les tensions entre la volonté de protéger les femmes et la peur de leur potentiel de désordre qui se jouèrent tout au long du procès. Le triomphe d'Elena, si l'on peut le désigner ainsi, constitue un appel au premier terme de ce paradoxe.

I, Elena de la Cruz: Heresy and Gender in Mexico City, 1568¹

JACQUELINE HOLLER

Résumé

In July 1568, a nun was denounced to the episcopal inquisition of Mexico City. Elena de la Cruz was a professed nun in the prestigious Nuestra Señora de la Concepción and a member of one of Mexico's most important families. She was charged with heretical propositions: namely, that she proposed limits to the powers of the papacy and church hierarchy, including Alonso de Montúfar, the archbishop of Mexico.

Elena's heretical words also took added meaning from contemporary religious crisis and reform. Some of the nun's conceptions vaguely suggested Lutheranism. More importantly, she seemed to deny the ability of the Council of Trent to carry out its programme of reform. Tridentine reformers were attempting to bring monasteries of women under the control of male religious leaders — and Montúfar was trying to bring regular clergy in general under episcopal governance. Elena's views threatened these efforts.

The essay argues that Elena's daring to speak on matters of doctrine was a form of gender treason; she also read forbidden books and attempted to find her own path to salvation. In the late sixteenth century, a woman who took this path was immediately suspect. Beatas, nuns, and laywomen had paid dearly for this error in Spain. Unlike many heretic nuns, though, Elena renounced her beliefs almost immediately when challenged by her abbess, and she showed no courage of conviction before the male inquisitors. Nonetheless, formal charges were prepared and followed through in meticulous detail. In charging Elena, Montúfar was nipping womanly insubordination in the bud, before it could infect the entire convent.

But if gender was part of what made Elena so dangerous, it was also what saved her skin. Elena's lawyers were able to use the topos of the weak, ignorant, misled woman to explain their client's deviation from the path of order and obedience. Hispanic gender ideologies made it possible to frame Elena's crime in terms of treason and disorder, but

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1. This paper is extracted from the author's Master's thesis, "I, Elena de la Cruz: Heresy, Gender, and Urban Crisis in Mexico City, 1568" (Simon Fraser University, 1992).

also provided an opportunity for the nun's reincorporation into society. The paper argues that Elena's trial provides an opportunity to examine the ambiguities of gender prescription and what we might call "rôle enforcement." The tension between corporate protection of women and fear of their potential for disorder is played out throughout the trial. Elena's triumph, if such it can be called, is to appeal to the former.

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En juillet 1568, une religieuse dénonça l'inquisition épiscopale de Mexico. Elene de la Cruz, membre du prestigieux couvent de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción et de l'une des familles les plus importantes de la ville, fut alors accusée d'hérésie pour avoir proposé des limites aux prérogatives du pape et à celles de la hiérarchie catholique, l'archevêque de Mexico compris.

Dans le contexte de réforme et de crise religieuse de l'époque, les propos hérétiques d'Elena déterraient une large signification. Certaines notions abordées par la religieuse avaient des relents luthéranisme. Plus encore, elle paraissait refuser l'habileté du concile de Trente à accomplir un programme de réforme par lequel les monastères de femmes passeraient sous contrôle masculin. De plus, Montúfar tentait de placer le clergé régulier sous la gouvernance de l'épiscopat, autant d'efforts que menaçaient les croyances d'Elena.

Cet article avance que la religieuse se trouvait à trahir les rôles sociaux de sexe contemporains, non seulement en ayant l'audace d'affronter des points de doctrine, mais encour parce qu'elle lisait des ouvrages interdits et qu'elle tentait de découvrir sa propre voie vers le salut. L'Église de la fin du XVI^e siècle suspectait sur le champ toute femme qui empruntait des directions. En Espagne, religieuses et laïques avaient payé chèrement pour ces erreurs. Cependant, à l'encontre de plusieurs de ces religieuses hérétiques, Elena abandonna ses propositions presque aussitôt qu'elles furent questionnées par son abbesse. De même, elle ne montra aucun courage de conviction devant les inquisiteurs mâles. Il n'en demeure pas moins que les accusations formelles portées contre elle enclanchèrent un processus méticuleux de prosécution. En poursuivant ainsi le procès, Montúfar tenta d'étouffer l'insubordination féminine avant qu'elle ne gagne la reste du couvent.

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In July 1568, Elena de la Cruz was denounced to the episcopal inquisition of Mexico City. She was a forty-three-year-old professed nun in the prestigious convent of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción and a member of one of Mexico's most important families. Elena was charged with heretical propositions: namely, that she proposed limits to the powers of the papacy and church hierarchy, including the archbishop of Mexico.

The ensuing trial² affords us a rare glimpse into the functioning of gender ideologies among the elite³ in sixteenth-century New Spain. The nun's daring to speak openly on matters of doctrine was a form of gender treason. Elena had also read forbidden books and attempted to find her own path to salvation. Beatas, nuns, and laywomen alike had paid dearly for this error in Spain. In charging Elena, the archbishop's inquisitor was nipping womanly insubordination in the bud, before it could infect the entire convent.

But if gender made Elena's transgression serious, it was also what saved her skin and won her the light sentence she received. The nun's lawyers were able to use the *topos* of the weak, ignorant, misled woman to explain their client's deviation from the path of order and obedience. Hispanic gender ideologies thus contributed to the zealotry of the prosecution, but also provided the defence with an opportunity to beg clemency. It is this gendered aspect of the trial of Elena de la Cruz that I wish to discuss in this paper.

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2. The trial dossier, comprising more than two hundred pages of testimony, is held in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City (Ramo Inquisición, Tomo 8, exp. 1, ff. 5-116).
 3. The Mexican Inquisition's rôle as enforcer of gender conventions and appropriate sexual behaviour has been studied through women from the lower echelons of colonial society. Jean Franco, for example, examines the 1801 trial of a poor separated woman, Ana de Aramburu, for delusions in her "The Power of the Spider Woman: The Deluded Woman and the Inquisition" in *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (Columbia, 1989), 55-76. Ruth Behar studies witchcraft trials in eighteenth-century New Spain in her "Sexual Witchcraft, Colonialism, and Women's Powers: Views from the Mexican Inquisition" (in Asuncion Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* [Nebraska, 1989], 178-206). While Behar claims that elite women were clients of sorceresses, the accused she discusses are of the underclass. Thus women of Elena's social status are underrepresented in newer scholarship. The term "gender ideologies" is used most effectively by Irene Silverblatt, who emphasises that beliefs about gender are not simply beliefs about the rôles of men and women, but spill over into and infuse fundamental beliefs about human society: "gender systems legitimize what it means to be male or female, and we are now aware that gender ideologies overflow male and female identities to infuse the fabric of social life; they permeate much of human experience, extending to our perception of the natural world, the social order, and structures of prestige and power." See Silverblatt, *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru* (Princeton, 1987), xxvi. But historians, particularly those who study the pre-modern world, should not be too hasty to impose easy bilateral paradigms of masculinity/centrality versus femininity/marginalisation. Unfortunately, such a discussion is well beyond the scope of this paper.

This is not to say, however, that the text of Elena's trial was *only* a reflection of the times, "a mirror carried down the high road of history."⁴ The text contains tensions: between respect for popular piety as foundation of the Counter-Reformation church and distrust of the unorthodox forms that piety might take; and most importantly, for my purposes, between honouring and protection of women and fear of their potential for disorder.⁵ Gender ideologies, then, are not monolithic. While *ultimate* — in that gender often frames the very basis of social structure — ideologies of gender are often ambiguous and subject to some degree of contestation at the level of practice. In examining Elena's trial, we observe sixteenth-century gender ideologies in action.

The Charge

The Bishop should also exercise the greatest diligence lest heresy creep in or the books of heresy be secretly introduced into his diocese. For there is no deadlier disease nor anything which, when it destroys the foundations of faith, *also suddenly overturns all public order.*⁶

Between the hours of eight and nine one morning in early July 1568, about a dozen nuns were sitting around in the workshop of la Concepción. The sisters were chatting and working. Some embroidered, while at least one nun was writing. During the course of the conversation among the sisters, Elena said something that scandalised her colleagues so greatly that she was almost immediately denounced to the Holy Office.

Her denunciation was in itself a rather unusual event. Women were a minor presence in Mexican inquisitorial trials, both during the episcopal Inquisition (1534-1570) and under the permanent tribunal from 1571 to 1700.⁷ They are underrepresented in cases of blasphemy, which are overwhelmingly male; are roughly equal to men in heresy cases;

4. The phrase is James Smith Allen's; see "History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction," *History and Theory* 22, 233-52; 235.

5. Another tension in the text offers a challenge to the writer of feminist history. Elena is not the "sixteenth-century precursor of Sor Juana," in Richard Greenleaf's phrase (see Richard Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* [New Mexico, 1969], 134-5). Neither, however, is she to be reviled because she grovelled in the Inquisition's dock. Elena is interesting precisely because she is not a "woman worthy" waiting to be rediscovered in order to be polished and inserted in a feminist pantheon. She was not persecuted for being ahead of her time — in fact, she seems eminently a woman of her time — but for a variety of reasons that are infinitely more complex and, to me, more interesting.

6. Gasparo Contarini, *De officio episcopi* (1516), trans. and quoted by John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola, Reform in the Church 1495-1540* (New York, 1969), 105; emphasis added.

7. Nonetheless, women appeared before the Inquisition more frequently than before civil courts in the modern period. For 1571-1700, Solange Alberro has estimated that women never exceed 30 percent of cases in a given year. See Solange Alberro, *La actividad del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Nueva España 1571-1700* (Mexico, 1981), 130.

and appear in the majority of magic cases.⁸ Overwhelmingly, women — particularly poor and coloured women — are associated with this latter crime, as Spaniards are associated with blasphemy and bigamy, Portuguese with judaising, and blacks with cursing.⁹ Elite women rarely appeared before the Inquisition.

Through the summer of 1568, Elena and other nuns of the convent were interviewed by fray Bartolomé de Ledesma, the inquisitor who served Alonso de Montúfar, Archbishop of Mexico. For eight years, Ledesma had been the Archbishop's right-hand man, both as diocesan administrator and as censor of printed materials. A Dominican, the friar was the archbishop's co-religionist and inseparable companion. Through Ledesma's interrogations of Elena and other witnesses, he was able to piece together a relatively clear picture of what Elena had said and done that morning in July.

The *cabeza de proceso*¹⁰ records that Elena had said and affirmed that it was not a sin to disobey the mandates of councils. Furthermore, she said, the pope could not declare any more mortal sins than the seven deadly ones. And finally, Ledesma noted, the nun had said that the Archbishop of Mexico had no authority to give pardons and indulgences.

Without exception, the nuns who testified confirmed Elena's transgression and added new information. The abbess, Ana de San Gerónimo, for example, testified that Elena had said in her presence that the orders of the council were made only to frighten bad Christians. Inés del Espíritu Santo, another nun, repeated the story Ledesma had by now heard many times, and added yet another incriminating detail. When the abbess threatened Elena with the pope's ability to cast her into hell, Elena questioned that power, saying, "What power does he have to cast me into hell?"

Even at this early date, when the decrees of the Council of Trent had not been completely received by the Mexican church, the nuns of la Concepción were almost unanimous in their belief that the council's mandates had the force of dogma. They were similarly orthodox on papal power and indulgences. Elena's position was one with which no nun agreed — or, at least, that no nun was willing to support openly. By the 26th of July, then, the inquisitor had a solid stack of papers affirming Elena's guilt. The woman Ledesma had encountered through the testimony of witnesses also demonstrated a sharp tongue, an irascible temperament, and a certain haughty disregard for the Catholic church and its hierarchy.

After hearing from some twelve nuns, Ledesma interviewed Elena three times before drawing up the charge. It was simple and followed to the letter what the witnesses and Elena herself had said: that, being in the workshop of La Concepción and talking about the profession of a certain nun, Elena had said that the other nuns should not believe

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. AGN, Ramo Inquisición, Tomo 8, exp. 1, 6.

the orders of the council, because the pope could not decree mortal sin; that there were no more than seven mortal sins; that the pope could decree nothing relating to mortal sin; and that the archbishop could not grant indulgences. And being reprehended by the other nuns, Elena had said that what she was saying was not heresy but great truth; that the orders of the council were created for the bad and not for the good; that a confessor had told her this; and that the nuns should not be afraid but should take no account of the council. And finally, in her confessions she had said that perfection consists in the keeping of the Ten Commandments.

Clearly, then, Elena had thumbed her nose at the church hierarchy in the presence of the other nuns. Though her propositions carried vague scents of various heresies, she was no heretic. But she had suggested limits to the power of the hierarchy — and particularly of holy councils. Furthermore, she had suggested that the church was engaged in a political game, using its decretory powers to intimidate bad Christians. In saying that the pope had no power to decree things related to mortal sin, she was denying the divinely granted nature of the pope's authority, which came to him from Christ through Saint Peter. And in saying that good Christians need not heed the decrees of councils, she implied that Christians might follow their own consciences: the death of doctrinal authority. Her beliefs, though they were far from reflecting a unitary heretical programme, were far from harmless. And the fact that they were promoted among women, and by a woman, may have made them more pernicious.

More importantly, however, Elena had formulated her opinions through reading, and the inquisitor Ledesma showed a great deal of interest in Elena's reading list. This should not surprise us: in 1546 the Council of Trent had already recognised the errors that reading could bring. The Spanish Inquisition responded promptly, publishing its first index of prohibited books in 1551.¹¹

The European church's suspicion of "bad books" was equalled or even exceeded by the Mexican church. In 1531, Charles V issued an edict prohibiting Indians from reading fiction¹² (romances being a particular addiction of the conquistador class).¹³ The examination of books was part of Ledesma's job, in accordance with the orders of the First Mexican Provincial Council (1555). The council decreed that "owing to the errors introduced among Christians by bad and suspicious books," the publishing and distributing of all books would be overseen by the archdiocese.¹⁴ In 1559, the archbishop

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11. In 1559, the first index to meet with papal approval was printed. Increasingly, books and their effects on readers — particularly "unschooled" readers — were viewed with distrust. In 1564, the Tridentine index formalised norms for censorship. See Sara Nalle, "Literacy and Culture in Early Modern Castile," *Past and Present* 125, 65-96; 72; also see "Index of Forbidden Books," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, VII, (Toronto, 1967), 434-5; 434.
 12. Nalle, "Literacy," 93.
 13. Francisco Fernández del Castillo, ed. *Libros y libreros en el siglo XVI: Selección de documentos* (Mexico, 1982), 9.
 14. *Ibid.* The order is reproduced on pages 9-10.

and Ledesma produced their own order concerning prohibited books.¹⁵ Increasingly, the episcopal inquisition moved against doctrinal works and catechisms in Indian tongues, Castilian devotional works, and popular fare such as Boccaccio. The Second Provincial Council (1565) prohibited Indians from owning Bibles and sermon-books.¹⁶ Elena's readership was thus juxtaposed with diminishing tolerance of the use of religious books by those unschooled in theology — including, of course, all women.

Elena's testimony mentioned two books by fray Luis de Granada, whose religious works were the bestsellers of the Spanish Golden Age, far outdistancing Cervantes and Lope de Vega.¹⁷ Fray Luis, born in Granada in 1504, was a zealous apostolic preacher who believed in the Erasmian ideal of theology for all — including women.¹⁸ A prolific writer, the friar published twelve books between 1554 and 1559. He was confessor to Queen Catherine of Portugal and in 1562 received the title Master of Sacred Theology from the Dominican order.¹⁹

But fray Luis's career was not without crises.²⁰ In 1559 and again in 1568, his books were first placed on the Index of Forbidden Books and then removed. (Elena was aware when she testified that she was in possession of a banned book.) The dangerous aspect of fray Luis's work, for the inquisitors, was twofold: first, fray Luis stressed the quest for perfection in spiritual life; and second, he wrote for and was popular among an audience that included many laypeople and women of all classes. Moreover, his work found adherents among the *iluminado* and *alumbrado* heretics,²¹ many of whom were women, including professed nuns.²² An inquisitor referred contemptuously to fray Luis's writings as "contemplation for carpenter's wives."²³ Here, we see, gender and social status function as reflexive metaphors; women and workers are equated as groups

15. The same year, the archdiocese banned the *Doctrina cristiana* of the previous bishop of Mexico, the Franciscan fray Juan de Zumárraga. The order is reproduced on pages 1-3 of Fernández.

16. *Ibid.*, 10.

17. Nalle, "Literacy," 80.

18. "Louis of Granada," *NCE* VIII, 1021-2. He was also a disciple of Juan de Ávila, a reformer who advocated an active clergy, poor relief, the rejection of honour, religious education for the laity, and other reforms. See Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Cornell, 1989), 80, 84.

19. "Louis of Granada," *NCE* VIII, 1021-2.

20. The most serious of these would come late in the cleric's life. In 1584, he was fooled by the false stigmata of the mystic Sor María de la Visitación — an incident that would be seen by many as proof that spiritual perfection should be a path for the few.

21. The *iluminados* and *alumbrados* emphasised the importance of individual conscience and grace over works. The illuminists came closest to a quasi-Lutheranism in their abandonment of confession. See Jaime Contreras, "The Impact of Protestantism in Spain 1520-1600," in Stephen Haliczer, ed., *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1987). See also Antonio Márquez, *Los alumbrados: orígenes y filosofía 1525-1559* (Madrid, 1972).

22. John A. Moore, *Fray Luis de Granada* (Boston, 1977), 16.

23. *Ibid.*, 34.

needing tutelage.²⁴ Persons of such mean social status, particularly if they were part of the *sexo débil*, had no business pursuing mystical knowledge of God. In doing so, they were bound to fall into error. Elena's reading of fray Luis, then, suggested that she was reaching beyond her grasp.

One of the major goals of the Counter-Reformation, of course, was the education of the laity into a homogeneous Catholicism. Literacy was seen as important in this task; the church tended to view illiterate laypeople as superstitious.²⁵ On the other hand, the rise of Lutheranism and the spread of *alumbrado* and illuminist sects in the first half of the sixteenth century suggested that there were worse threats than superstition. The literate laity came to be viewed with suspicion, their literacy correlated with heresy.²⁶ One Italian preacher even claimed that "all of the lettered are heretics."²⁷

In the second half of the sixteenth century, then, reading was increasingly viewed with suspicion. There was little impetus to change women's low levels of literacy.²⁸ Prescriptive writers²⁹ tended to link women's illiteracy to prohibitions against women's teaching or to limitations of "feminine nature." Sixteenth-century writers such as fray Luis de León cautioned against a woman's studying anything difficult; rather, women should devote themselves to "a simple and domestic office."³⁰ There were those who approved women's literacy as a means of uplift. Juan Luis Vives, for example, was not hostile to female literacy *per se*. In his *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), he

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24. See Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Studies in Social Discontinuity; New York, 1980), 16, for a discussion of this notion in Florence.
25. Peter Burke, "The Uses of Literacy in Early Modern Italy," in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds. *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge, 1987), 31.
26. *Ibid.*, 32. In Italy, Burke places this transition at about 1520, when Protestant books began to circulate. The classic study of such a correlation is, of course, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980), which studies a roughly contemporary Italian trial.
27. Burke, 32. Also see Contreras, who calls the book "the chief popularizer of heresy" (54).
28. European women's literacy lagged behind that of men well into the modern period. In early modern Spain, literacy levels for men compared with those of men in Northern Europe. Women, however, were largely illiterate, even compared with their Northern European counterparts, whose literacy was limited at best. See Nalle, "Literacy," 69. She gives figures for the seventeenth century ranging from 69 percent in Madrid down to 52 percent in Cuenca and Galicia. For the sixteenth century, the range is 34 to 70 percent, while women's range is from 2 to 16 percent (68).
29. It will be noted that the writers mentioned are Spanish rather than Spanish-American. Asunción Lavrin argues that Spain was "the intellectual source of [women's] role definition... not a single work on feminine education was printed in colonial Mexico" (see Lavrin, "In Search of the Colonial Woman in Mexico: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in her *Latin American Women* [Westport, 1978], 23-59; 25).
30. Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* (Buenos Aires/Mexico, 1938), 139: "a la mujer buena y honesta la naturaleza no la hizo para el estudio de las ciencias, ni para los negocios de dificultades, sino para un solo oficio simple y doméstico."

expressed the opinion that a woman *should* learn to read, “copying some sad, prudent, and chaste sentence over and over again. As she shapes her letters, she is being shaped by another’s moral and religious precepts.”³¹ Here, woman has an uncritical, unmediated relationship with the texts she reads, absorbing them by virtual osmosis. Thus, by extension, women’s literacy is unproblematic *only* as long as the sentences they read are “sad, prudent, and chaste.” Presumably, should women read “bad books,” they might absorb them just as easily. This belief obviously implies the control of women’s reading. Such attitudes were not uncommon in the lower echelons of society as well as at the level of prescriptive literature. In 1579, a fisherman’s wife told the Cuenca Inquisition that “women should not have books, or know how to read and write — they’re crazy!”³²

But many women did, of course, read the popular devotional manuals of the sixteenth century; and sometimes their reading led them to shape their own unorthodox spiritual trajectories. The path of private prayer came to be associated with the heretics who believed that contemplation could lead (on its own, without works, without church mediation) to perfection. Among these heretics women were prominent, and occasionally even took leadership rôles.³³ Such women inverted the natural order, in teaching men; moreover, they threatened public order in their insistence that the church hierarchy need not be obeyed.³⁴ The errors of these women had begun with the reading that encouraged them to follow their own paths to spiritual fulfilment.

To be sure, New Spain had seen little of such activity. But given the Mexican Inquisition’s concern over “bad books,” Elena’s ownership of forbidden books — of those books most suspected of leading the untutored to heretical positions — must have raised suspicions. Elena and the other nuns of the convent were *not* pious and ignorant. While almost all colonial women were uneducated and illiterate, nuns were, as a group, well educated. Professed nuns were expected to be literate both in reading and writing, to manage simple accounts, and to know Latin sufficient to their offices as choir nuns.³⁵ The ability to read and write were prerequisites for admission to la Concepción.³⁶ As

31. Quoted in, and translated by, Patricia E. Grieve, in “Embroidering with Sainly Threads: María de Zayas Challenges Cervantes and the Church,” *Renaissance Quarterly* XLIV, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 86-104; 89 n. 7.

32. Nalle, “Literacy,” 92.

33. Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, 1990), 23. Lea thought it “natural that the impressionable female nervous system should render women especially liable to the ecstasies which were the characteristic feature of this emotional form of religion [mysticism]; we find them everywhere as its exponents and missionaries.” *Chapters from the Religious History of Spain Connected to the Inquisition* (New York, 1967 (1890), 252.

34. *Ibid.*, 143.

35. See Asunción Lavrin, “Female Religious,” in Susan Socolow and Louisa Hoberman, eds., *Cities and Society in Colonial Latin America* (New Mexico, 1986), 165-95; 185.

36. See Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Mexico, 1946), 33. Women who could not read were admitted as white-veil nuns, exempted from choir duty and admitted with a smaller dowry.

well, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century convents functioned on a limited scale as informal schools for future nuns and other elite girls. Of the twenty-five nuns who appeared before fray Bartolomé's inquisitorial panel, only three could not write their names.³⁷ Of the other nuns, some had the splotchy, uncomfortable, unligatured signatures associated in early modern writing with women and the unlettered.³⁸ Most, however, had practised signatures. And a few, including Elena, had bold, elegant, stylised signatures that indicate a high degree of comfort with signing. Given that writing was generally taught separately from (and after) reading, these women were, by the standard of the time, highly literate.³⁹ They were precisely the kind of women who were likely to read: not in the unproblematic manner described by Juan Luis Vives, but to formulate their own ideas.

Elena had done just this, and the results lay before the inquisitor on sheaves of paper covered in notary Juan de Vergara's practised hand. The question was not simply unorthodox opinion; male clerics constantly engaged in disputations about the same issues Elena had discussed. Don Alonso Chico de Molina, dean of the cathedral of Mexico, once grabbed a Dominican friar by the cape during a dinner at the archbishop's palace. At issue was whether the sacraments in and of themselves conferred grace on the recipient. It was not Chico de Molina's unorthodox views, but his refusal to submit to doctrinal authority, that eventually saw him tried by the Montúfar Inquisition (and the Council of the Supreme Inquisition, which found him innocent).⁴⁰ Unlike Elena, Chico de Molina was given every chance to apologise to the archbishop, Ledesma, and the Friar Osorio for his conduct and to retract the offending views. Elena's tearful apologies to the convent had somehow not prevented the Inquisition from pursuing the case. Therefore, her crime was *not* simply a matter of convent discipline, of her betraying the Church and the cloistered life to which she had committed herself. Rather, her crime was an infection that had to be flenced from the convent, lest it spread.

The problem with Elena was that there was no legitimate *use* for her questioning. As a woman, she did not belong to the group (male clerics) that was allowed to discuss matters of such import. Those matters, as Elena well knew, were "deep things not given

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37. The three were among the older nuns: twenty-eight-year-old Isabel de San Gerónimo, fifty-six-year-old María de la Circuncisión, and thirty-four-year-old Luisa de San Gerónimo.
 38. See Ginzburg, 89. I am grateful to Dr. Sharon Strocchia of the Department of History at Emory University for pointing out to me that the lack of ligatures alone may indicate not a lack of education, but an adherence to gothic script.
 39. Nuns' writings have become a popular source for feminist scholars. Notable is Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau's *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* (New Mexico, 1989), which comments on and presents (in English and Spanish) selected writings.
 40. Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 144-9. Montúfar undoubtedly used the Inquisition against his enemies, prosecuting several clerics for doctrinal error, but the prosecution of Elena differed in that Elena had backed off quickly when faced with the censure of her coreligionists, the abbess, and the vicar. Submissiveness, however, was not enough to prevent Ledesma from pursuing the trial to its end.

to women.” Elena’s questioning of hierarchical power, and the sarcastic manner in which she dismissed the council’s aims, suggested that this woman was out of control. And her attempts to formulate her own theology, through reading mystical bestsellers, smacked of the same subversion of hierarchy. She had not only engaged in theological questioning of her own, but had attempted to convince her coreligionists that her views were correct. Elena was, in retrospect, clearly no heretic in the mould of the beatas, nuns, and laywomen who had in recent years been punished at Seville and in Valladolid. Nonetheless, she was out of line and out of order. In a historical moment at which public order seemed fragile at best, rebellion against the natural order could not go unpunished.⁴¹

The Defence

The Bishop’s first care should be for the men rather than for the women, both because men surpass women by nature and also because the governance of a city proceeds with a certain order. Women by nature are subject to men and ought to wait upon their command. Wherefore it seems proper that the Bishop’s rule be brought to the women by the men as mediators, or instruments, so to speak.⁴²

On the nineteenth of August, Ledesma named licentiate Fulgencio de Vique, a prominent attorney of Mexico City,⁴³ to defend Elena. He was immediately sworn in, promising to do his job well and faithfully, and to keep everything secret. Two days later, Ledesma appointed a second defender, licentiate Juan Vellerino, who was ordered on pain of excommunication to accept the commission and was sworn in on the twenty-third. Elena’s defence was underway.⁴⁴

In his defence of Elena, Juan Vellerino had to rewrite the script that the Inquisitors had constructed. In effect, he had to create another Elena de la Cruz. His defence was anchored in some of the fundamental beliefs of Spanish American society concerning the nature and status of women. He stressed, in turn, Elena’s elite status, her debilitating anger, and her tearful contrition.

Vellerino began by saying that his client had no intention of deviating from the faith or of saying anything against the beliefs and teachings of the Church. The failings the Holy Office could collect against her, he said, proceeded not from malice but from ignorance, because as a woman Elena knew no better. For this reason, he suggested, the Holy Office should be merciful and give her a gentle, healthful penance. Concerning the

41. I refer to the turmoil caused by the 1566 conspiracy of the Marqués de Valle, which is discussed at greater length in my Master’s thesis, and which I am currently researching.

42. Gasparo Contarini, *De officio episcopi* (1516), quoted in Olin, 101-2.

43. John F. Schwaller describes him as “a distinguished lawyer before the Audiencia.” See Schwaller, *The Church and Clergy in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (New Mexico, 1987), 154.

44. Greenleaf describes the defenders as appointed by Elena’s family rather than by Ledesma, “because appointed defenders usually appear in the procesos.” However, the dossier *does* contain Ledesma’s orders, which appear on pages 71 and 71v.

indulgences (granted for wearing the rosary), Vellerino said, his client knew little — because she was a woman, unschooled in matters of law. Vellerino also noted that his client had, after learning that the indulgence was real, held the rosary in greater reverence, and had worn and continued to wear it.

The question of the pope's ability to create new mortal sins could not be ignored. But here too Vellerino noted that what his client said came not from malice but from ignorance. The defender suggested that the inquisitors attribute Elena's unsatisfactory confessions "not to malice but to the difficulty a woman has in responding well to many questions."⁴⁵ In fact, the answers she had given showed her "simplicity." All charges against Elena had been amply proved; Vellerino and de Vique made no effort to deny the allegations. Rather, the defence got its power from its creation of a parallel script that detailed an offence committed in anger by a simple woman. The effect was not simply to trivialise the offence, but also to provide assurance that this woman could be rehabilitated and should be punished lightly.

To establish Elena's need for protection, Vellerino emphasised her elite status. The lawyer arranged the questioning of character witnesses so that two questions, the first and third, mentioned Elena's father, the licentiate Altamirano. Though witnesses weren't asked by the first question to comment on his character, they invariably did so. Thus witnesses ended up repeating information about the prominence and nobility of Elena's father. In describing him, witnesses used the standard sixteenth-century formula of *hidalguía*. Altamirano was "prominent," and was a nobleman of known lineage, without stain in every generation. Blood and reputation were the most important components of nobility.⁴⁶ In asserting them as proper to Elena's family, witnesses told the inquisitors that what had happened to Elena had repercussions in the world of honour; something they undoubtedly knew well.⁴⁷ The concurrence of all witnesses concerning Elena's social standing was irrefutable. Yet we should not divorce Elena's elite status from gender ideologies. Only elite women were placed to fulfil gender expectations of shame or *vergüenza*, which signified first of all enclosure. Enclosure was for most women not economically viable. The culmination of female honour was only possible at the top of the social pyramid. Elite women, then, fulfilled feminine stereotypes as few others could. Elite status and ideal femininity had a symbiotic relationship.

If Vellerino's first concern was to establish who Elena was, he was equally concerned with establishing her anger. The words Elena had spoken arose from her being

45. "una muger dificultosamente podia bien responder a muchas preguntas" (76).

46. See I.A.A. Thompson, "Neo-Noble Nobility: Concepts of *Hidalguía* in Early Modern Castile," *European History Quarterly* xv (1985): 379-406; 382-5. For the importance of reputation, see J.H. Elliott, *Spain and Its World 1500-1700: Selected Essays* (New Haven, 1989), 163.

47. It has become a cliché that honour is corporate; that is, it inheres in a family, though the family's honour can be destroyed by one member. See Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in J.G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London, 1965), 21-77; 52-53.

at the time “very inflamed and with great choler and furor of ire and annoyance.” His client, Vellerino argued, was in the habit of “with little reason getting carried away by anger in such a manner that she almost parts with her senses.” “And being in this condition,” he continued, “she would persist excessively to come out on top with what she said.” This was no ordinary anger. It was a rage in which, as so many witnesses confirmed, Elena “would say anything” — and had. Elena’s anger would redeem her by serving as an excuse. She hadn’t believed the things she’d said, but had only thrown them in the faces of the nuns with whom she was arguing. Although witnesses for both the prosecution and the defence confirmed Elena’s fury, the defence argument ignored the fact that the anger had arisen *after* she started promulgating her unorthodox opinions.

Nonetheless, anger was a crucial plank in Elena’s defence. From a theological standpoint, anger was the critical characteristic needed to distinguish heresy from blasphemy and profanity.⁴⁸ Moreover, Elena’s anger was important to the gender-based defence. Since the nineteenth century, anger has generally been seen as more proper to masculinity than to femininity. In sixteenth-century Europe, however, the reverse was true. Women were seen as physiologically more prone than men to anger and violence.⁴⁹ This was a long-standing belief that dated to the ancient world, in which uncontrollable violence was seen as “womanish.”⁵⁰ The Aristotelian notion of woman as defective man was finally rejected by Aquinas,⁵¹ but medieval and Renaissance philosophers nonetheless continued to believe that women were constitutionally weaker⁵² and therefore less controlled. The female sex was considered prone to attacks of melancholy.

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48. Blasphemy was by no means considered a trivial offence. Blasphemy was considered to be conceived in malice, and its effects, particularly in an honour-based society, were damaging to the general respect that ought to be accorded God. (“Blasphemy,” *NCE* II,3. 606-7.) On the other hand, blasphemy was considered less serious than heresy. During the sixteenth century, the Mexican Inquisition tended to conflate the two offences, often judging as blasphemy what might have been seen as heresy had a more clear distinction between the two been drawn (Greenleaf, *Inquisition*, 12).
49. As venerable a source as Seneca knew that “anger is a womanly and childish vice” (*ira est vitium muliebri et puerile*). Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia, 1988), 53.
50. *Ibid*, 12.
51. See Vern L. Bullough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1973): 485-501; 487.
52. Beliefs about women’s childishness and uncontrollability were bulwarked by humoral pathology, the dominant medical model of the sixteenth century. George M. Foster, “Humoural Pathology in Spain and Spanish America,” in Antonio Carreira et al, eds. *Homenaje a Julio Caro Baroja* (Madrid, 1978), 357-70; 361. Women, according to the classic humoral model promoted by fray Luis de León among others, were watery, governed by the cold, moist humours (See *La perfecta casada*, 36). Men were fiery, governed by the hot and dry (Bullough, 491). This meant, among other things, that women were considered passive, men active. It also meant that women were physiologically less stable and lacked psychological control. See Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1980), 41.

but also to fits of anger.⁵³ And woman's anger was not only more easily aroused, but much more intense and virulent. According to fray Luis de León, "there is no anger that equals that of an enraged woman" (*no hay . . . ira que iguale la de la mujer enojosa*).⁵⁴ This was the "natural" inheritance of women, but it was an entirely negative one: women had no business being violent, as did men in war, for example.⁵⁵

Beliefs about the body served as a way of structuring political and social realities as well as medical ones.⁵⁶ Humoural pathology thus posited a biological basis for social rôles. Yet however necessary, biology was not a *sufficient* condition for those social rôles. As Avicenna had it, the hen who once defeated the rooster would soon grow spurs.⁵⁷ This was a warning to those men who allowed their women to escape masculine control. Women's anger could take the form of a "catfight" — all hair-pulling, amusement, and even titillation⁵⁸ for male onlookers. But beneath the amusement, there was a serious message about gender and power.

Prescriptive sources describe anger as arising out of garrulity — a characteristically female vice.⁵⁹ When women talked, they argued, and when they argued, they fought. How different from this vice was the female virtue of silence, modeled after the silence of the Virgin.⁶⁰ Following the apostle Paul, churchmen consistently argued that women's eloquence lay in silence. The well-governed woman offered silence/obedience to the man's speech/command.⁶¹ Silence was equated with enclosure and chastity as the

53. The *Historia animalum* described women as "more querulous, more apt to scold and strike." *Ibid*, 42.

54. *La perfecta casada*, 19.

55. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987): "If a woman's rage erupted into violence, it could be approved in the exceptional case of defending her children or her religion, as in a grain riot or a religious uprising, or her people, as with Judith and Joan of Arc, but most rightful bloodshed was better left to men" (81). Women in Spain did take up arms in the Reconquest, of course: but such women were generally seen as "manly women," women who took up masculinity as a superior and necessary identity in times of crisis. For example, Ávila has a legend of Jimena Blázquez, a woman who became male (*varonil*) and fought for the city, but refused political power and returned to femininity once the crisis was over (Bilinkoff, 3). Mary Elizabeth Perry suggests that Catalina Erauso, the famous nun-ensign of Mexico, avoided punishment because her life suggested the superiority of maleness and reinforced patriarchal values (Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* [Princeton, 1990], 135).

56. *Ibid*, 363.

57. Bullough, 496.

58. Davis reproduces a 1580 engraving of "The Battle for the Eel," in which women battle over a phallic eel, disheveling one another's hair. One woman's buttocks and legs are serendipitously revealed (see 100).

59. *Ibid*, 16.

60. *Ibid*, 23.

61. *Ibid*, 54.

fundamental components of decent womanhood.⁶² “A quarrelsome woman is a leaky house” (*Casa que se llueve es la mujer rencillosa*), wrote fray Luis de León.⁶³

If we follow the trajectory of the trial from this perspective, we see the origins of Elena’s anger in gossip. Garrulous women, instead of keeping silence, discuss things that are beyond their ken. Elena too speaks out, becoming successively more angry and adding blasphemy to blasphemy. Silence is imposed on all by the abbess, and order is momentarily restored. Nonetheless, Elena’s words must be dealt with by a higher (male) authority than the abbess; but in emphasising her anger and the repentant tears she later sheds,⁶⁴ the defence attorneys embed her words in a context of feminine frailty. The swing from rage to contrition, from garrulousness to tears, provides a story the inquisitors can understand, because it accords with everything they understand about women’s nature. Far from the feminine perversity of those female heretics who “grow spurs” and refuse to renounce the heresy they promote, Elena conforms to the feminine script. This context implies a lenient sentence.⁶⁵

Conclusion

On the sixteenth of September, Ledesma ordered Elena and Vellerino to appear to hear the definitive sentence. The sentence came down on the second of October in the archepiscopal palace, whence it was taken to the convent. After consulting with “persons of science and of conscience,” Ledesma reached the conclusion that Elena was guilty of having said that the Sovereign Pontiff and the council could not decree mortal sins, that there were no more than seven deadly sins, and “other pernicious words and heretical propositions.” Fray Bartolomé sentenced Elena to the following: one feast day, she was to stand in the choir of the convent while the high mass was said, with her head uncovered and with a lighted candle in her hands.⁶⁶ She was to fast three Fridays, repeat the psalms of penitence, and abjure her errors. She was solemnly warned to avoid such errors in the future.

62. See Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1986, 123-142). “The surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house. These three areas were frequently collapsed into each other” (126).

63. *La perfecta casada*, 18.

64. The final question every defence witness was asked was: did the witness know that after the fateful events, Elena had been very repentant and contrite, “with great tears”? And did the witness know that this was well known in the convent? To a person, all witnesses remembered either seeing Elena’s great tears or hearing of them.

65. Davis argues that anger would not imply a lenient sentence, or a pardon, in the case of a serious crime such as the murder of one’s husband. A woman’s anger was only trivial when assimilable into the catfight paradigm.

66. “un día de fiesta en el coro del dicho monasterio mientras se dixere la misa mayor en cuerpo y en pie y con una candela encendida en las manos” (116).

It has been suggested that Elena's actions were threatening to the hierarchy, not because of her great intellectual powers but because of her gender and a complex of other factors beyond her control or ken. First and foremost, the trial of Elena de la Cruz resonates with an increasing surveillance of religious women. From the dawn of the Lutheran threat throughout the sixteenth century, religious women were increasingly viewed with suspicion. The prominence of mystical women among the heretics persecuted by the Inquisition in Spain and elsewhere suggested a particular susceptibility to heterodoxy among the weaker sex. At the same time, reading and writing, always problematic activities for women, became correlated with Lutheranism. The sixteenth century was a turning point for women religious with quasi-episcopal jurisdiction, as the Council of Trent removed such power from women's orders and subjected all female orders to male. No monk should henceforth have to genuflect to an abbess.⁶⁷ There was thus reduced room for women religious in general. Women such as Elena, who sought to formulate and discuss their own opinions, found even less tolerance for such activity. In this sense, Elena's experiences echo those of many women of the period, who found themselves forced to take refuge in feminine weakness in order to survive. Elena was no Saint Teresa, but she shared with the saint the protective if stifling *topos* of womanly frailty. Embracing this motif was for many women, and increasingly in the sixteenth century, the only way to escape suspicion.

Scholars now generally accept that gender is one of the fundamental vehicles for the expression of beliefs about power, and also for the construction of social relationships.⁶⁸ This means that in the realm of theory, for example, royal authority was construed as similar to the rule of a man over his wife. This has obvious implications for what it meant to be a king, or *queen* — or a man or a woman, for that matter. In a corporate world, the governing of a republic was equated with the governing of a household.⁶⁹ Womanly insubordination thus resonated with political treason in ways explicit — as in the axiomatic English law where a woman's murder of her husband was petty treason⁷⁰ — or implicit.

What does this have to do with Elena? Simply put, she was heir to centuries of conflation of power with gender: legitimate authority with maleness, and submission (or rebellion) with femaleness. Her femaleness added fuel to the fire of her insubordination rather than trivialising it. Her anger did the same. The possibility of the whole convent's boiling over cannot have been far from the minds of the hierarchy, especially given the

67. Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York, 1973), 82. According to Morris, "it was only in the sixteenth century that an antifeminist attitude arose with regard to the jurisdiction of abbesses and that it became a subject of debate" (73). Now, apparently, monks found it degrading to genuflect to a woman (51).

68. Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91, No. 5 (December 1986): 1053-75; 1067.

69. See *La perfecta casada*, 86.

70. See Davis, 81.

recent examples from the peninsula. Montúfar's — or perhaps we should say Ledesma's — decision to pursue the case so aggressively was linked to concern over individual or corporate womanly insubordination as well as desire to exert episcopal authority over la Concepción.

This does not change the lack of verisimilitude between the trial and its outcome. If Ledesma were a novelist rather than an inquisitor, we might accuse him of failing to create a plausible ending. The sentence was without doubt a light one.⁷¹ Why? Solange Alberro suggests one possibility: that women appear in Inquisition cases as irresponsible minors whose behaviours do not merit serious treatment.⁷²

Yet Elena's case was taken seriously by the nuns who testified before Ledesma and by the inquisitor himself, who devoted a substantial amount of time and paper to the trial. And heretic women, such as the Lutheran beata María de Borboques, burned in Seville in 1559,⁷³ were certainly taken seriously in their insubordination. Women were thus heirs to two sides of one tradition. One said that women were perpetual minors, children whose crimes shouldn't be taken seriously and should be dealt with within the framework of family discipline. This might be called the "feminine frailty" argument, which emphasised women's need for protection. The obverse might be called "feminine perversity": women, when they "went bad," would be much worse than bad men — *hell hath no fury* — and were potentially dangers to the whole of society. To a certain extent, women (especially elite women and those of Spanish blood) accused by the Inquisition could play into the former belief. If they did so, women could gain access to the tender consideration due to minors; they need only, as would Elena, work within the framework dictated by that *topos*.⁷⁴ Vellerino's — and Elena's — triumph was in defusing the charges by allying the incident with the trivial errors of a minor rather than the rebellion of a dangerous, heretical, unruly woman.

Vellerino, Elena's defender, successfully situated his defence within the tropes of Hispanic gender ideologies. From the beginning of the trial, it had been clear that Elena had erred, but Vellerino minimised her error. His story managed to locate Elena's insubordination on the trivial side of the dividing line that separated "childish" women from "dangerous" women. By emphasising her femininity, Vellerino managed to transform Elena's character — and even her astonishing anger. As we have seen, he described Elena as "simple." When angry, she would, as was repeated again and again by the witnesses for the defence, "take leave of her senses." Elena's words, in the hands

71. Greenleaf calls it "very light." See *Inquisition*, 136.

72. Alberro, *La actividad del Santo Oficio*, 130.

73. María de Borborques was relaxed and burned for Lutheran heresy. See Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Beatas and the Inquisition in Early Modern Seville," in Stephen Haliczer, ed., *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1987), 147-69; 149.

74. Davis's women murderers did not plead for special consideration on the basis of their sex, perhaps recognising that it would be of no use; Elena proved quite willing to plead and adept at pleading feminine frailty.

of Vellerino, become the babblings of an ill-disciplined child. Ledesma, who was not unsympathetic to the need for protection of women,⁷⁵ was amenable to Vellerino's argument, giving Elena the "light and healthful penance" the defender had requested.

And so we leave bareheaded Elena with her candle, reciting the psalms of penitence, the very picture of reintegration into the community. Reintegration, however, must have had its price. One can only guess at Elena's position within the convent after the incident. She had, after all, been humiliated, a forty-three-year-old woman forced to kneel before the "ill-educated girls" to whom she had considered herself superior. She had read her defender's descriptions of her simplicity, her defence witnesses' descriptions of her uncontrollable anger. The intellectual superiority that she felt she possessed (and which she had flaunted before the other nuns) she had been forced to deny, mumbling to Ledesma that she "understood little."

In the final analysis, Elena is no "woman worthy." She was, as far as can be ascertained, no Sor Juana, and her personality as described by her fellow nuns is not particularly attractive. She was an arrogant woman with a hot temper. But she read books, cared about what she read, and tried to formulate ideas for herself: no small task for a woman in her position. And it is worth remembering that it is only because of her anger, her arrogance, her inability to "be silent and dissimulate,"⁷⁶ that we know of her at all.

Her suitability for membership in a feminist pantheon aside, her 1568 trial illustrates something about the haphazard but ultimate manner in which authority was extended over women religious by the church. Furthermore, we have seen how gender ideologies are often debated, negotiated, and reinforced within a context of contestation. Prescriptive works such as Luis de León's *Perfecta casada* tell only half the story of gender ideologies. A case such as Elena's shows both the effect of prescription and the extent to which prescription was worked out at the level of daily life. The trial shows gendered authority in its human, rather than monolithic, manifestations.

75. Ledesma appears before the cabildo in 1578, arguing for the establishment of a new Dominican convent, Santa Catalina de Sena. See Edmundo O'Gorman and Salvador Novo, eds., *Guía de las actas de cabildo de la ciudad de México: Siglo XVI* (Mexico, 1970) 4054, 28 April 1578 (547).

76. This was the strategy of María de Ágreda, who was given this very sound advice by none other than the Virgin. See T.E. Kendrick, *Mary of Agreda: The Life and Legend of a Spanish Nun* (London, 1967), 84.