

Sisters-in-Arms and Letters: The Convent Space as “Paradoxical Geography”

The convent space in which the biological and spiritual sisters María de San Alberto (1568-1640) and Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570-1646) lived, worked, and worshipped was uniquely suitable for the creation and fomentation of a singular tradition of women’s writing. Sor María and Sor Cecilia’s dramatic works evidence this through privileging female characters, promoting the mystic tradition, and emphasizing the Virgin Mary’s central role in Catholic theology. The convent space reveals not only hegemony and resistance, in line with what Gillian Rose terms “paradoxical geography,” but reveals a strong tradition of women writers, learners, and educators, as well. The dramatic works of these two sisters evidence the influence of their biological mother and their two spiritual mothers, Saint Teresa of Ávila and the Virgin Mary. These foremothers inspired them to create works in which the spiritual triumphs over the physical, mothers play an essential role in the salvation of mankind, and women directly access the divine. Only in the simultaneously restrictive and freeing convent space could such a powerful and unique tradition flourish.