

BOOK REVIEWS



El Libro de la oración de María de Santo Domingo, Estudio y edición, by Rebeca Sanmartín Bastida and María Victoria Curto. *Medievalia Hispanica* 29. Iberoamericana – Vervuert, 2019. Pp. 190. ISBN: 9788491920809.

The publication of this edition and study of the *Libro de la oración* (Book of prayer) is an important event not only for scholars of Spanish literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also for anyone interested in recovering the memory of a woman so essential to the Castilian culture of the period as María de Santo Domingo (1480/86–1524), the famous “beata” (blessed one) of Piedrahíta. It was perhaps Marcel Bataillon, in his great work *Erasme et l’Espagne* (Paris, 1937), who popularized on a mass scale the controversial figure of María. Without doubt, she is the most famous component in Castilian territory of that group of Italian women categorized by Gabriella Zarri thirty years ago as “living saints,” women related both to the ecclesiastical establishment and to various courts who—through their prophetic, mystical, and charismatic authority—played an essential role in the political decision-making of their times.

In María’s case, we know that her role in the reform of convent life carried out by Cardinal Cisneros (1436–1517, one of her main promoters and protectors) was fundamental. Also that her public ecstasies—in which the language of her body, the ritualized theatricalization of her visions, and somatic phenomena such as the stigmata in her side (which for a time opened every Friday, gushing blood)—were attended by the most powerful characters of the court, who listened attentively to her words in search of answers and guidance for taking decisions. This continuous and visible activity brought her before an ecclesiastical court, which judged her on at least four occasions.

What we have here is the first edition of a printed text of which only one copy has been preserved. Previously, the most common way to access the original text was a rare facsimile edition from José Manuel Blecua (Madrid, 1948) or, in the English-speaking world, the still-remarkable translation and study by Mary E. Giles (*The Book of Prayer of Sor Maria of Santo Domingo*, 1990). The text that

this new publication presents includes the whole of the *Libro*, which, as well as some paratext (essentially, a prologue that defends the *beata* and the feminine prophetic word), includes four revelations in different formats (three revelations given in rapture that were written, we must suppose, by one of the attendees, and María's reply to a letter). The third revelation is particularly noteworthy because, as shown by its heading ("During the communion of the Feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross it was asked if in the islands newly discovered by Columbus the Word of the Lord had ever been published before now"), María responds with the voice of Christ to the question launched from the audience as to why the native Americans were not Christians before the arrival of Europeans in their lands. Her words should be understood in a context in which the debate about the indigenous peoples was the order of the day at the court and, without any doubt, María's words will surprise the reader.

Indeed, this edition is exemplary in its function of reintegrating the book in a specific historical context. In the first place, the two parts that make up its introduction connect the text to various topics that enrich our understanding of it. In the first part (15–68), Rebeca Sanmartín Bastida delves into the figure of the Dominican tertiary and her actions through a review of the available documentation. The bibliography is extensive, complete, and up to date. In the second part (69–122), María Victoria Curto explores in depth one of the fundamental themes that emerges from the book, which is the relationship of María's dramatized ecstasies in the court to performance, performativity, and—above all—to music. As well as this diptych-style introduction, undoubtedly the most up to date that one can read about the *beata*, there is a careful annotation of the text, and from this we can see, in a particularly conclusive way, María's character (like that of various other "living saints" of the time) as the inheritor of a mystical tradition that includes such names as Catherine of Siena, Angela of Foligno, and Mechthild of Hackeborn.

To conclude, we should not forget, as one of the sections of the introduction reminds us (57), that the *Libro de la oración* represents the first printed mystical text by a Castilian women author. If we also consider Rebeca Sanmartín Bastida and María Luengo Balbás's new edition of the *Revelaciones* of María De Sano Domingo (2014), we could claim that we are witnessing the restoration of the complete works (at least, according to what we know at the moment) of these women whom Ronald E. Surtz (*Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, 1995) years ago called "The Mothers of Saint Theresa of Avila".

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