

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

World Languages and Cultures Theses

Department of World Languages and Cultures

---

12-17-2014

**Writing as an Act of (Dis)Obedience: Discursive Agency in El Libro que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena; monja professa del convento del Sr. S. Geronimo de la ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio y de Ysabel Munos su legitima muger**

Tabitha Humphrey

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mcl\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/mcl_theses)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Humphrey, Tabitha, "Writing as an Act of (Dis)Obedience: Discursive Agency in El Libro que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena; monja professa del convento del Sr. S. Geronimo de la ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio y de Ysabel Munos su legitima muger." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2014.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/6394051>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of World Languages and Cultures at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages and Cultures Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

WRITING AS AN ACT OF (DIS)OBEDIENCE: DISCURSIVE AGENCY IN *EL LIBRO QUE SE CONTIENE LA VIDA DE LA MADRE MARÍA MAGDALENA; MONJA PROFESSA DEL CONVENTO DEL SR. S. GERONIMO DE LA CIUDAD DE MEXICO HIJA DE DOMINGO DE LORRAVAQUIO Y DE YSABEL MUNOS SU LEGITIMA MUGER*<sup>1</sup>

By

TABITHA HUMPHREY

Under the Direction of Mónica Díaz, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a close reading and an analysis of the *Vida* of Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine how Lorravaquio expresses agency, authority and power throughout her *Vida* by means of the rhetoric of *imitatio Christi* and descriptions of her visions and illnesses. For the aim of this work, agency is interpreted as free-will and consciousness in terms of action; as a result, the author and the work itself, both of which demonstrate agency, exude power and authority. This type of analysis will explore if the *Vida* genre can be read as quasi-feminist texts.

INDEX WORDS: authority, *imitatio Christi*, conventual writings, women religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the original orthography of the manuscript is maintained throughout unless otherwise noted. Translation of title *Book which Contains the Life of Mother María Magdalena; Professed Nun of the Convent of San Geronimo in Mexico City, Daughter of Domingo de Lorravaquio and of Ysabel Muños his Legitimate Wife*. Please note that all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

WRITING AS AN ACT OF (DIS)OBEDIENCE: DISCURSIVE AGENCY IN *EL LIBRO QUE SE CONTIENE LA VIDA DE LA MADRE MARÍA MAGDALENA; MONJA PROFESSA DEL CONVENTO DEL SR. S. GERONIMO DE LA CIUDAD DE MEXICO HIJA DE DOMINGO DE LORRAVAQUIO Y DE YSABEL MUNOS SU LEGITIMA MUGER*

by

TABITHA HUMPHREY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

Copyright by  
Tabitha Celeste Humphrey  
2014

WRITING AS AN ACT OF (DIS)OBEDIENCE: DISCURSIVE AGENCY IN *EL LIBRO QUE SE CONTIENE LA VIDA DE LA MADRE MARÍA MAGDALENA; MONJA PROFESSA DEL CONVENTO DEL SR. S. GERONIMO DE LA CIUDAD DE MEXICO HIJA DE DOMINGO DE LORRAVAQUIO Y DE YSABEL MUNOS SU LEGITIMA MUGER*

by

TABITHA HUMPHREY

Committee Chair: Mónica Díaz

Committee: Annette Cash

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2014

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my mother, Debra Johnson, the strongest woman I know, who inspired in me the love of reading, without which this would have been impossible; to my husband, Joshua Humphrey, who has always been supportive of my academic habits, and never ceased in encouraging me to finish a work that at times I thought insurmountable; and to all of my friends and family who have only been encouraging in my academic endeavors. Thank you all for everything.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot begin to thank the director of my thesis, Dr. Mónica Díaz, for her never-ending support, patience, guidance and direction in relation to this project, for it was she who sparked my interest in colonial discourse and introduced me to the *Vida* genre and women religious writings. I would also like to thank Dr. Annette Cash for her instruction and expertise in translation, for her interest in this project, and for her encouragement and insightful comments.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: (RE) WRITING THE <i>VIDA</i>.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>An Introduction to Studies of the <i>Vida</i> and other Writings by Women Religious..</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Research Process and Manuscript Details .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Setting the Stage: Establishing a Historical Perspective .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>A Life to be Remembered: la Vida de la Venerable Madre María Magdalena</b>	
<b>Lorravaquio .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Identifying and Defining Agency .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: (RE) READING THE <i>VIDA</i>: AGENCY AND <i>IMITATIO</i></b>	
<b><i>CHRISTI</i> .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Reflections of Imitation of Christ .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Developing an Identity: Illness as Agency .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Envisioning Agency: Mysticism and Agency .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>54</b>

## CHAPTER ONE: (RE) WRITING THE *VIDA*

“Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself.”

– Truman Capote

### Introduction

With these words, well-known American novelist Truman Capote, embodies the art of writing, explaining its existing rules and emphasizing that these rules can and should be altered depending upon your own notions and objectives. It is precisely this act of modification in writing which is the focus of this thesis. During the colonial period, most women were illiterate, nuns being the exception to this rule (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 1). However, nuns were only allowed to write if so ordered by a superior within the Church. If a nun did indeed write, she was expected to follow a certain set of prescribed rules and guidelines to avoid suspicion, or even worse prosecution by the Inquisition, for the contents of her writings. Despite these restrictions, women religious continued to write.<sup>2</sup> They wrote various types of works, from poetry and plays, to music and, life stories also known as *Vidas*. This particular genre has clear predetermined contents which will be described later. Due to content restrictions, the authors of these life stories had to be creative if they desired to express their own desires and identities. I propose that Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, professed nun in the Convent of San Geronimo in Mexico City, is one of these creative women, who employed her own version of a “rhetoric of femininity.”<sup>3</sup> María Magdalena hides behind a mask of obedience, humility and *imitatio Christi* to develop her own voice and identity, though at times she seems to abandon the

---

<sup>2</sup> The term “women religious” is used within the field to refer to women who have dedicated their lives to God.

<sup>3</sup> For more elaboration on the concept of “rhetoric of femininity” please see section on literature review. You may also reference *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* by Alison Weber.

trope of humility all together, perhaps even being prideful at times. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine how Lorravaquio expresses agency, authority and power throughout her *Vida* by means of her usage of the rhetoric of *imitatio Christi* and descriptions of her visions and illnesses. It is important here to briefly define the term agency and its relationship to power and authority. For the aim of this work, I use agency theory of Sherry B. Ortner and Laura M. Ahearn. Based on their work, this thesis interprets agency as free-will and consciousness in terms of action; as a result, the author and the work itself, both of which demonstrate agency, exude power and authority. My analysis will explore if the genre of *Vidas*, Lorravaquio's in particular, can be read as quasi-feminist texts of their time; as writing was a binary action, one of both obedience and disobedience, perhaps even as an act of subversion. Women religious were under patriarchal vigilance at every turn. Not only were these nuns living under the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church, but they were also living in the "New World," where their communities were controlled by the patriarchy of the Spanish crown. They were indeed quite powerless in the whole scheme of things, the act of writing being the only method they had to make an utterance in their own names.

### **An Introduction to Studies of the *Vida* and other Writings by Women Religious**

When one mentions the subject of writings by nuns, the first person to come to mind for most people is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, by far the most studied and well-known nun of the Hispanic World for having been a daring feminist for her time. However, the study of conventual writings goes well beyond Sor Juana. It is true that the study of colonial discourse and literature has been prominent for quite some time, yet the study of *Vidas* as a genre is relatively recent having begun in the 1980s. Leading researchers in the writings of Latin American women religious include, but are not limited to: Electa Arenal, Kristine Ibsen,

Asunción Lavrin, Kathleen Myers, and Stacey Schlau. The approach of these authors has varied slightly resulting in a plethora of knowledge on the subject.

Asunción Lavrin has written many books and articles relating to the study of nuns and their writings from a more historical standpoint to literary analyses of specific writings. In an early article titled “Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico” (1972), Lavrin explores the reasons for which a young woman would join a convent, explaining the process and restrictions of so doing, informing the reader of economic and race stipulations, and their vows. Lavrin then continues to explain how the writings from the nuns themselves offer us insight into their world. Not so surprisingly, Lavrin dedicates the greater part of this section to Sor Juana, listing her literary works and their purposes, while stating that though her writings are fascinating they do not offer much insight into the daily practices of the convent. However, the author does mention that there are lesser-known writers who wrote their *Vidas*, thus leaving researchers with great knowledge of the details of conventual life in New Spain. This particular article, though very informative, lacks an analytical perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Fast forward into the 2000s and Lavrin’s work seems to take a more analytical turn. In 2005, Lavrin published “La madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio y su mundo visionario”.<sup>5</sup> Based upon my research this is one of the only published articles specifically written about Lorravaquio. Lavrin begins the article by explaining her interest in Mexican nuns and how she began to research in this field. She offers the reader a brief historical introduction into the genre of the *Vida* and then begins her investigation of Lorravaquio, again stating the facts surrounding her manuscript from a more historical perspective. Approximately half way through the article,

---

<sup>4</sup> Not all of Lavrin’s works have the same approach. For example in the article “Las mujeres tienen la palabra: Otras voces en la historia colonial de México” co-authored by Edith Couturier, a more textually driven analysis is offered to the reader by citing textual examples to support their arguments.

<sup>5</sup> This article will be referenced henceforth as “La Madre.”

Lavrin begins discussing Lorravaquio's visions stating that it is by far the most interesting section of her manuscript. It is here that we have the first evidence of an analytical approach to Lorravaquio's writings. Lavrin examines specific passages and offers explanations and analyses of them, as opposed to being strictly informative from a historical standpoint. However, it is important to note two facts: firstly, only the section of Lorravaquio's *Vida* containing her visions is explored and secondly, as Lavrin is a historian, the article does remain historically driven.

Lavrin's work has been monumental in the field of women religious studies, but other researchers have focused more specifically on the writings of professed nuns. Two of these authors are Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, co-authors of the book *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Words*.<sup>6</sup> Both Arenal and Schlau have published other works as co-authors and independently, but this particular work is the largest and most detailed account. Published originally in 1989 and with a revised edition in 2010, *Untold Sisters* is considered "the first general introduction to Hispanic convent culture published in the United States" (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* back cover). In their introduction, Arenal and Schlau offer a historical and religious context to these writings. Their subsequent chapters include texts in their original Spanish and accompanying translations of women religious from convents in Spain and the New World. These writings are divided by theme and include letters, poetry, theatrical works, and *Vidas* among others. Each text is introduced in a general sense historically and socially and then the authors allow the texts to speak for themselves. It is important to note that these texts appear as excerpts not as complete works, and that the authors do not offer an in-depth analysis of them either. However, the researchers in this field are greatly indebted to Arenal and Schlau for making mostly unknown and unpublished texts more readily available, for it is this book which introduced me to Lorravaquio's writing.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Words* is herein after referred to as *Untold Sisters*.

Two other researchers must be mentioned, as they have publications focusing on the *Vida* genre specifically. One notable researcher in the field is Kristine Ibsen, author of *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America*, published in 1999. In her book, Ibsen examines the autobiographical writings of eight nuns from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exploring the topic of self-representation. She places the texts in historical, social, and cultural contexts to elaborate on the rhetorical strategies of these women. Her work is most notable because it does indeed offer an analysis of *Vidas* beyond a purely historical view, something rather revolutionary at the time of publication. The other researcher to be mentioned is Kathleen Myers author of *Neither Saints nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (2000).<sup>7</sup> Myers is a professor of both Spanish and History, so as a result her text has great historical content and takes an archival approach to forge the history of the women so often left out of our history books and literary canons. She focuses on the texts of six seventeenth century religious women examining their interaction with the Church and the societies surrounding them. Myers' introduction offers the reader historical and social context as those of her contemporaries, but each subsequent chapter offers the reader something more. Divided by author and theme, Myers gives descriptive introductions to each nun by intertwining their texts within their historical and social contexts, thus allowing the reader to better understand the purpose of the text itself. Each chapter includes a chronology of the nun's life. The book also incorporates an appendix which contains the writings in translation so that the reader may readily access larger portions of the analyzed texts. Myers' contribution to the field is undeniable. She not only offers historical background, but she also offers the reader a more literary analysis of

---

<sup>7</sup> *Neither Saints Nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* is herein after referenced as *Neither Saints Nor Sinners*.

these works. However, the study of lesser known nuns is lacking from her text. Myers examines the writings of nuns whose writings have, to my knowledge, been previously published.

Last, but certainly not least, I must mention Alison Weber's work titled *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1990).<sup>8</sup> Though this work focuses specifically on the writings of Santa Teresa, a Spanish nun, its significance cannot be negated, for it is the first work to dedicate itself to analyzing the rhetorical strategies behind Santa Teresa's writings. Weber introduces her text with a clear and informative historical and social context as her contemporaries have done. She then goes on to emphasize the misogynist role acquired by the Church during the Counter-Reformation and how it altered the way women were portrayed and expected to behave. Each subsequent chapter is dedicated to one of Teresa of Avila's works, focusing on a particular rhetorical strategy and giving specific textual examples. Her study proposes that Santa Teresa used specific rhetorical strategies to assert herself in a world where she could only do so by following prescribed contents. As Teresa of Avila's writings are considered the model for all subsequent women religious' texts, even in the Americas, this thesis uses Weber's work as a point of departure to examine the discursive strategies of Lorravaquio in her *Vida*.

Researchers in the field of colonial discourse and particularly those interested in conventual studies and writings are beyond indebted to these aforementioned scholars and many others. It is my goal to take their works as a point of departure for my thesis. I will use their publications as background information and for comparative studies when necessary. What my study offers that has not, to my knowledge, been done before, is an in-depth interpretation of a *Vida* which still remains unpublished and in manuscript form, and therefore little studied, seeking to validate its importance beyond its historical value.

---

<sup>8</sup> This work shall be hereinafter referenced as *Rhetoric of Femininity*. Teresa of Avila is also known as Santa Teresa.

## Research Process and Manuscript Details

When faced with the daunting task of choosing a topic for this thesis, I knew I wanted to choose something from the colonial period. However, it was not until I was introduced to Arenal and Schlau's *Untold Sisters* that I discovered I would be researching women's spiritual writings. Upon reading their chapter with excerpts from Lorravaquio's *Vida* I was intrigued by the details of her suffering, illnesses, and punishments and by the way in which they were described and presented in the text. It was then that I knew I wanted to know more about this unforgettable woman. The manuscript with which I am working is currently held in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas.<sup>9</sup> It is a copy of the original manuscript and is dated October 15, 1650 by Madre María Lorravaquio's nephew, an officer of the Inquisition. At the time of transcription, the original was in the possession of Madre Francisca de San Martin of the Convent of San Geronimo. It is important to recognize that it is a copy of the original because things could have been changed, though the transcriber states that is a true and faithful copy. Lorravaquio's nephew writes "juro in verbo Sacerdotis ser cierto y verdadero" 'I solemnly swear it to be faithful and true' (Lorravaquio 2). It is also important to note that though well-preserved, the age of the manuscript and the fact that it is handwritten, resulted in legibility issues at times. Aside from the handwriting itself, there is bleed-through from other pages, multiple abbreviations, and a lack of standardization in spelling. For this reason, I maintain original orthography in all referenced quotes and denote illegibility when necessary. The manuscript also contains a note at the end which states "Todo esto va aprobado y visto pr. los Padres Gaspar limpias de Carvajal: y Hernando Mexia dela compañia de Jesus" 'All of this is approved and has been seen by Father Gaspar limpias de Carvajal: and Father Hernando

---

<sup>9</sup> With the help of my thesis director Dr. Mónica Díaz, I was able to acquire an electronic copy of the manuscript.

Mexia from the Society of Jesus' (Lorravaquio 81). This note only further validates the authenticity of the manuscript and removes any culpability from the author.

### **Setting the Stage: Establishing a Historical Perspective**

When embarking on the journey of analyzing any text, one cannot ignore the importance of its historical and social contexts. Such details must be stated and acknowledged to better understand the text and the contexts under which it was written. Texts from the colonial era are no exception. Colonization cannot be discussed without discussing religion and the conversion of the natives in Latin America. Around the time the Counter-Reformation caught on in Europe, the colonization of Latin America was growing (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 8). The success of colonization depended greatly upon establishing “sacred and secular Spanish institutions and practices on American soil” (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 3). Among these practices was indubitably the Catholic Church; and so, as a result churches and convents were established in the New World. From the establishments of these convents would emerge a sort of convent culture, both a haven and a prison for the women within their walls.

Convent culture is pertinent to understanding the writings produced within it. To define the term “culture,” I refer to the leading anthropologist in the field of agency studies, Sherry B. Ortner. In her 2006 book *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*, Ortner defines cultures as “public systems of symbols and meanings, texts and practices, that both represent a world and shape subjects in ways that fit the world as represented” (116). As evidenced by this definition of the term “culture,” it is undeniable that “convent culture” is a valid term to describe the happenings, lives, and products from within the walls of a convent. However, knowing the proceedings and other details of conventual life is paramount in understanding the lives of the women who lived there and the writings they produced.

Convent society reflected the hierarchies of gender and race in the secular world (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 3, Powers 166). For example, only those women who were able to prove their *pureza de sangre* were eligible to become black-veiled nuns.<sup>10</sup> Only these women were able to hold office and vote in convent elections. Eventually women of color were able to join convents, but only under the white veil which denied them the opportunity to have a role in the politics or economics of the convent (Powers 166). Behind the convent walls there was proper place for each activity which mirrored “conceptions of the divine order”; thus another example of the hierarchies of the outside world (Ibsen 97). In her book *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America*, Kristine Ibsen elaborates on conventual structure. She explains that beside the main chapel there was an area for nuns to see without being seen, for they were “hidden behind woodwork, grating, and sometimes a heavy black curtain” (Ibsen 97). Returning again to the notion of hierarchy among nuns, nuns of the black veil were to worship in the *coro alto*, or upper choir, while all other women in the convent were to worship in the lower choir, a clear mirror image of the hierarchy of the veils (Ibsen 97). Below the choirs was the crypt where nuns would be buried and below that the ossuary where their remains would be moved after remaining in the crypt for a set amount of time, for once a woman joined the cloister, her body would never again leave convent walls (Ibsen 97).

The concept of enclosure, as Stephanie Kirk author of *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities* explains, was instituted “to protect women’s chastity;” however, Kirk also declares enclosure to be “a misogynist act as it denied women agency in the care and control of their own physical movements” (8). The binary representation of the convent as both a “refuge” and a “prison” derives from this concept; for joining a convent was not always the

---

<sup>10</sup> *Pureza de sangre* refers to having pure blood. The term came about during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries as a way of identifying true Christian Spaniards, as many of the Jews and Moors living in Spain had and were converting to Catholicism. To have pure blood, one had to prove origin and ancestry.

choice of the woman doing so. Arenal and Schlau explain that not only did novitiates come from noble and wealthy families, but also consisted of “dishonored” or “disobedient” women, as well as those seeking a “studious” life (*Untold Sisters* 3). However, it is ironic that the restrictions the Church placed upon women would result in “an outlet for their expression” (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 6). It was within convent walls that women enjoyed more autonomy than any other group of women in the New World (Powers 177). Lavrin defines a convent “as a self-ruled society of women sharing social and spiritual values and organized in a clearly hierarchical fashion” (*Brides of Christ* 352). Though convents were under the patriarchal rule of the Church, they were still predominately run by women; and so, the Church which attempted to remove power from women, ironically also provided them with leadership opportunities.

Before delving into the intellectual space provided by the convent, one must acknowledge the process of entering a cloister. It is no surprise that the primary reason for entering a convent was the desire to lead a life devoted to Christ, for as Lavrin affirms “religious perfection and the fulfillment of monastic vows” were the main objectives for a colonial nun (“Values and Meaning” 387). Professing to a convent was not an easy feat. Women had to endure scrutiny about their “racial background, birth, willingness to profess, and proof of a virtuous life,” as well as jump through multiple administrative hoops (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 50). After entering the cloister, a nun underwent a novitiate period of approximately one year. During this time, she would learn the rules and ways of conventual life (Lavrin, “Values and Meaning” 372). A professed nun took vows of “poverty, chastity, obedience and enclosure” (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 82). For purposes of this thesis, the vow of obedience is of most interest. Lavrin describes this vow as “the renunciation of personal will and the unconditional submission to the commands [...] of the convent” (*Brides of Christ* 86). She continues by stating

that this vow communicated the nun's "voluntary" offering of submission (*Brides of Christ* 86). It is ironic that free-will had to be acknowledged in order to renounce it because it warranted women religious agency while simultaneously declaring that they had none.

As mentioned previously, professed nuns often benefited from more power than any other colonial woman. One of these routes to power was education. In their article "Leyendo yo y escribiendo ella", Arenal and Schlau state that the convent offered an intellectual space for women away from the outside world and declared that there are four elements which aided the intellectual growth of women in the convent (129). These four elements are: "separation from men; [...] re-formation of human and cosmic relations in a community setting; reciprocity and collaboration; and female authority and self-consciousness" (Arenal and Schlau, "Leyendo yo" 133). Lavrin and Couturier also confirm the concept of collaboration by asserting that convents provided a space for women to act in groups, a privilege unavailable outside of the convent walls (279). As a result of this intellectuality developed by professed nuns, Kirk describes convents "as an entity that constantly threatened to escape its handlers" (8). It was their literacy which proved to be one of the most challenging results of the intellectual space provided by the convents.

It is exactly the precept of intellectuality and convent writings which resulted in convents being a society conducive to women's agency. In her studies of Practice Theory, Ortner "restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action," the actor being women religious and the larger structure being the Church (3).<sup>11</sup> It is this irony and power struggle which resulted in the Council of Trent

---

<sup>11</sup> Practice Theory is an anthropological approach which came about in the 1970s. These theories "set out to conceptualize the *articulations* between the practices of social actors "on the ground" and the big "structures" and "systems" that both constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them" (Ortner 1-2).

(1545-1563) and the Inquisition in New Spain. In her article “La Mística y el corazón: una tradición de espiritualidad femenina en América Colonial”, Araya Espinoza declares that the goal of the Council of Trent was to regulate women’s religious experiences (134). One of the results of the Council was the mandate of enclosure, for previously it had been optional for professed nuns (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 7). Another consequence of the Council of Trent was the declaration of “holy ignorance” for women (Arenal and Schlau, “Stratagems” 25). The Council cited Saint Paul’s edict as grounds for this declaration. Found in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Paul writes, “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.” (1 Cor 14:34-36). The Council took Paul’s words literally to mean that women should not be educated unless taught by their spouse which meant that they should have no reason to read or write, especially in Latin. Women religious would later on ingeniously divert this concept by declaring that it was God’s wishes for them to write and/or study; they were after all Christ’s brides. Due to the Council’s ruling on “holy ignorance,” the Index of 1559 was passed banning all vernacular religious texts (Weber 34). As a result, after the Council of Trent women’s writing from the convent was perceived as an act of defiance, though it was also one of obedience, as these women were writing at the command of their spiritual leaders (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 16).

The Council of Trent also clarified the role of the Inquisition which by the 1550s began to view interior Christianity as suspect (Weber 34). It was the goal of the Inquisition to examine suspect religious practices, especially those which claimed to have a direct connection with God without the mediation of the Church (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 7). This direct

connection was often a result of individual prayer and spirituality. As a result, the Post-Tridentine Church developed strict supervision of the individual spirituality by means of three processes: “confession, canonization, and inquisition” which as a result shaped the evaluation of holiness and modes of representation. It is this mode of supervision which in essence led to the genre of the *Vida*, as the Congregation of Holy rights began to request writings of life stories (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 7-8). These stories were to contain a life confession, beginning with birth and ending at the time of confession. These spoken confessions were often followed by a request of a written one, which unfolded to develop the genre of the *Vida*. (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 11).

The value of the *Vida*, as a genre, cannot be negated, though opinions do vary appertaining to the critics’ field of study. As aforementioned, the most discernable significance of these works lies within their historical value. Based on these views, *Vidas* are valuable because they were written by women when women were thought not to have the right to voice themselves publically, which included writing. As a matter of fact, one must reiterate the fact that nuns’ were not allowed to write unless so ordered (Ibsen 11). So, writing in itself was both an act of obedience and defiance since the Council of Trent, held from 1545 through 1563, declared the need for “holy ignorance” and illiteracy for women religious (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 7, 16). Arenal and Schlau argue that the importance of these writings lies beyond that which was first thought stating that they provide not only information about daily life and relationships, but also demonstrate power and consciousness of these female writers (*Untold Sisters* 2). Asunción Lavrin views their notability from a more collective perspective describing them as reflections of the mentality of the era from an individual point of view (*Brides of Christ* 323). Myers also views their archival merit by interpreting them as offering “us the opportunity

to broaden our knowledge of the past and of the stories that have emerged out of it” (*Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 167). It is also important to note that it is not only women’s writings that have been left out of the literary canon; numerous written religious texts by both men and women have also been overlooked. Exceptions to this rule are Teresa de Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Myers, *Crossing Boundaries* 151-2). It is the genre of the *Vida* which Sor Juana chose to follow in her *Respuesta* “to justify her life path and to critique percepts about women’s religious lives” (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 102). Aside from these aforementioned reasons, *Vidas* are also treasured because throughout history and over time, they have disappeared; the fact that so many writings are missing, only reiterates the prestige that should be placed on those which remain.

The format of the confessional *Vida* did not vary greatly. They were written both autobiographically and biographically. Some critics go so far as to refer to *Vidas* as auto-hagiography because their writings seek to represent themselves according to the lives of saints (Ibsen 11). Historically, the genre has roots in Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* and is highly influenced by the writings of Santa Teresa who set the standards for such writing by women in Latin America (Ibsen 29, Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 15). *Vidas* were written in an oral language as they would have been spoken; they consist of asides and jumps in time (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 15). However, the contents were indeed prescriptive. Kathleen Myers explains that the *vida* narrates a Christian childhood, a religious calling to the convent, and evidence of living a pious life, “often depicted as a mixture of suffering (*imitatio Christi*) and the manifestation of God’s goodness (*misericordias*) in her life” (*Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 103).

However, scholars such as Weber, Arenal, Schlau, and Araya Espinoza remind readers that these texts contain more than seen at face value, that the contents should be deciphered and

analyzed. In their article “Stratagems Of The Strong, Stratagems Of The Weak: Autobiographical Prose Of The Seventeenth-Century Hispanic Convent,” Arenal and Schlau state that the language of *Vidas* bring about questions of power and submission (27). Confirming Weber’s study on the *Rhetoric of Femininity*, Arenal and Schlau confirm that women religious had to mask suspicious thoughts and actions. As a result, nuns developed an “ingenious verbal camouflage” (*Untold Sisters* 8). Using this “verbal camouflage” allowed women religious to hide behind a mask of weakness and obedience while portraying strength. It was Teresa of Avila who first developed this technique, enduring the concept of “holy ignorance” yet developing a style to express her visionary authority without posing a direct threat to men (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 10). It is this innovative technique which I argue gives *Vidas* as a genre authority and thus agency. Firstly, these accounts are written and still in existence today. As Laura Ahearn argues in her article “Language and Agency,” there is a certain relationship between language and power (111). Secondly, in the autobiographical *Vida*, such as that of Lorravaquio, the female author is the subject of her own narration. Ibsen explains that this enabled the author to become “an active agent [...] and not merely an objectified other” (17). However, since the writing was mediated by her confessor, she had to use care, hence the “verbal camouflage” (Ibsen 17). Based on these statements, I conclude that the *Vida* genre depicts a group of authors who were primary agents in their life stories whose writing empowered them to leave their footprints in history.

### **A Life to be Remembered: la Vida de la Venerable Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio**

María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muños was one of these authors who wrote an autobiographical account of her life story. The very fact that her *Vida* is autobiographical incontrovertibly awards it a certain authority. Her story depicts the way she saw herself and/or

the way she wished to be seen. She had power in the way in which she represented herself with words. Lorravaquio's *Vida* is also considered the first mystical text of New Spain (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 339). Though not much is known about the circumstances of her life outside of the convent, the fact that her nephew was an officer in the Inquisition and the fact that she mentions distaste for how servants were treated signify that she came from an affluent family (Lorravaquio fol. 2, 4). María Magdalena was born in 1576, though her exact date of birth is unknown, and professed on July 20, 1590 at the age of fifteen, in the Convent of San Geronimo in Mexico City, the same convent which Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz would join roughly eighty years later. She spent forty-four years and three months bedridden, after becoming ill in 1592 approximately two years after professing, and died January 19, 1636 (Lorravaquio fol. 81-2).

As aforementioned, the copy of the manuscript with which I am working was transcribed in 1650, yet it is important to note that the precise dates within which Lorravaquio wrote her *Vida* remain unknown. However, in the first section of her *Vida*, María Magdalena while describing the suffering endured during her treatments she writes: "...que son treinta y tres años desde el principio de estos males" 'it has been thirty-three years since the commencement of these illnesses' (fol. 12). Taking this enumeration into account along with her date of death and the total amount of time she was bedridden, I approximate the time of writing to be between 1623 and 1624. Following the traditional format of the period, Lorravaquio's *Vida* begins with an explanation of the reason why she is writing. She declares her writing to be an act of obedience to her Jesuit spiritual fathers, both of whom had requested that she write her life story: Padre Geronimo Ramirez and Padre Juan Sanchez. After declaring that she is writing in the name of God, she writes "obedescó á este mandato y obediencia de mi[s] [padres]" 'I obey this order and obedience to my fathers' (fol. 2). It is important to be cognizant of the fact that this

statement serves a binary purpose. First, Lorravaquio chooses these words to demonstrate her obedience and secondly, to reiterate that she is only writing because she was ordered to do so, not for voluntary reasons, thus removing any culpability on her part. For as Ibsen explains, “a woman could not admit to writing on her own initiative: from a strategic perspective, it was necessary to justify this act by framing it as the will of God and her confessor” (22). And so, Lorravaquio does just that, declares the writing to be the will of her confessors. However, in terms of how her work begins with a clear representation of agency, it is notable that she emphasizes herself as the subject of the verb, she is choosing to obey. The fact that she is the subject of this action demonstrates that the action is a conscious one.

The *Vida* of Lorravaquio is divided into three parts. The first section tells the story of her life, focusing on her childhood and her ailments. In addition, her narration continues to follow hagiographic tradition of divine gifts; for example in speaking of her daily habits as a child Lorravaquio writes:

En estos deseos y ejercicios estube hasta la edad de diez años [...] y luego la Virgen infundió en mi un deséo muy grande de ser monja; [...] Luego me dió tan gran deseo de deprender á ler para saber de esta Madre mía y de Dios que con muchas veras y cuidado lo ejercitaba y proseguia con mi resado: pues parándome en esto algún tiempo quiso su Magestad darme gracia sabiendo ya lér todo lo mas del tiempo que yo podía entre dia gastaba en leer el libro de Nuestra Señora del Rosario...(fol. 3-4)

I followed these practices and wishes until I was ten years old [...] and later on the Virgin instilled in me a great desire to become a nun; [...] Then, [in reference to her relationship with Mary] it gave me a great desire to learn how to read, in order to know more about My Holy Mother and about God, that truthfully and carefully I practiced and continued

with my praying: so to stop here for a moment, His Majesty wanted to give me grace, already knowing how to read, I spent as much time as possible each day reading the book *Our Lady of the Rosary*...

With this quote, Lorravaquio mimics the hagiographic tradition by explaining Mary's divine intervention and instruction in her learning how to read. The second section of her *Vida* narrates her daily schedule. María Magdalena states that she awakens and then offers "...á su Magd. toda [su] alma y corazon y potencias y sentidos..." 'to His Majesty all of [her] soul and heart and strengths and senses...' (fol. 12). This statement refers back to *Imitation of Christ* and self-offering. She continues to elaborate on the details of her prayer schedule and other details of her daily schedule. It is in this section where Lorravaquio comments on the time she spends cleaning her wounds, Lorravaquio writes "...las siete de la mañana desde esta hora hasta las nueve gasto en curarme las fuentes y postemas..." '...from seven in the morning until nine I spend time cleaning my wounds and abscesses...' (fol. 12). With these words, she is reiterating how illness was a defining feature in her life, so much so, that she dedicated a specific amount of time to it each day. The third and longest segment elaborates on her visions, giving an insight into her mystical and spiritual life. As Myers explains, her visions are directly associated with the *imitatio Christi*, since a mystic used her visions as a way to imitate Christ (*Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 13). Though this is the section containing a description of most of her visions, they are also mentioned in the other two sections. They are distinguished throughout the text by a cross-like emblem. Despite the fact that the format of Lorravaquio's *Vida* is quite traditional, displaying evidence of her piousness, I argue that there are defining characteristics which make her work distinctive, offering us an insight into her consciousness. These aspects include the way *imitatio Christi* and the descriptions of her illness and visions are depicted within the text. Using

agency theory by Susan B. Ortner and Laura Ahearn, I will prove how Lorravaquio, from a position of instructed silence, developed a voice for herself.

### **Identifying and Defining Agency**

Using the life story of Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, this thesis infiltrates the study of the *Vida* genre with the proposal that such works, especially the autobiographical accounts, should be reread and analyzed for the presence of agency as the authors are the subjects of their own narratives. It will then examine in detail the life of Lorravaquio and how she demonstrates agency in her writing by means of *imitatio Christi*. Though at times she hides behind what Weber refers to as “rhetoric of femininity,” what makes Lorravaquio different is her sometimes, but not frequent, blatant lack of humility. To analyze the presence of agency, this thesis takes into consideration how Susan B. Ortner defines the term “agency” and how it comes about, as well as, Laura Ahearn’s explanation of the relationship between language and agency.

In her book titled *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (2006), Sherry B. Ortner focuses on the relationship between culture and agency, stating that practice theory should not be completely abandoned, but should be advanced upon. She begins with an explanation of practice theory stating that it “restored the actor to the social process without losing sight of the large structures that constrain (but also enable) social action” (Ortner 3). This explanation should remind the *Vida*’s reader of the relationship between women religious and the larger entity that is the Catholic Church, its priests and other leaders, for such a correlation cannot be negated. It is for this reason, that I concur fully with Ortner’s argument that no power can completely and perfectly control those subordinate to it (5). She argues that “both [entities] have agency and understanding and thus can always find ways to evade or resist” (Ortner 5). It is this concept of resistance which is most embraced in the writings of women

religious. These women developed a way to subvert the power of the Church over them, while at the same time conforming to their vows of obedience.<sup>12</sup> Ortner views the concept of subjectivity “as the basis of “agency,” declaring that agency happens “within a matrix of subjectivity” (110). This view highlights the relationship between those in power and those subordinate to it, explaining that the subjects also have the power to resist those commanding over them. She continues her explanation that power and agency are undeniably connected, defining power as “both domination and resistance” (Ortner 143). Ortner states that all social actors maintain some level of agency, despite their social positions. In an attempt to define the term “agency,” she concludes that it is inevitably a form of power possessed by a knowing, conscious subject (Ortner 111, 152).

As the subject of this thesis is how Lorravaquio expresses agency through a written discourse, the relationship between language and agency is of utmost interest. However, the reader must be conscious of the fact that, as Ahearn explains, “[d]iscourse is a product of its culture” (111). This fact underscores the importance of understanding the culture from which a text is produced, for without such a perspective a text cannot be fully comprehended nor its value appreciated. In her article titled “Language and Agency” (2001), Laura Ahearn offers several definitions of agency and proceeds to explain its inherent relationship to language itself. The primary definitions of agency offered are “agency as free-will” and agency as resistance (114-5). Both definitions will be utilized in this thesis, though for the argument of considering the *Vida* genre as quasi-feminist texts, that of resistance is more compelling. As Ahearn explains, many feminist theories argue that proof of agency consists of opposing any form of patriarchy (115). Though Lorravaquio’s writing may not be a direct opposition to patriarchal authority, meaning she was not attempting to fully divert their power, I do believe her discourse to be a means in

---

<sup>12</sup> For further information on this concept, see Alison Weber’s *Rhetoric of Femininity*.

which to empower herself and other women religious, thus opposing patriarchal forces, even if only slightly. Also central to the argument of this thesis is the relationship between language and power. Ahearn explains that all languages have three basic relations: “subject of an intransitive verb [...], agent/subject of a transitive verb [...], and object of a transitive verb [...] (120). Consequently, I argue that agency can be demonstrated by a linguistic analysis of discourse, that is to say that the semantics and syntax of a text can be used as evidence in an effort to substantiate the agency of the writer. Another concept of language and agency is the perception that the ability to read and to write, what we define as literacy itself is a form of agency. As Ahearn proclaims: “...it is important to understand literacy as a form of social practice (or agency), and to investigate the way it interacts with ideologies and institutions to shape and define the possibilities and life paths of individuals” (128). From this standpoint, I conclude that the very fact that these women religious were literate aided in determining their ultimate fate, leaving us with evidence of their lives, and providing us the opportunity to uncover the hidden meanings in their writings.

## **CHAPTER TWO: (RE) READING THE *VIDA*: AGENCY AND *IMITATIO CHRISTI***

### **Introduction**

“Perhaps the core source of inspiration for the life stories we study is the early Christian precept of *imitatio Christi*. The ultimate goal of devout individuals and of the Church was to create lives that imitated Christ.” – Kathleen Myers

As evidenced by Myers’ words, all of the life stories we study contain elements and evidence of the notion of *imitatio Christi*, or imitation of Christ; and so, it is not surprising that the *Vida* of Lorravaquio is no exception. Generally speaking, women religious would strive to subsume this concept in their life stories or confessions, for it was the goal of a colonial nun to

live the most pious, Christ-like life possible. It was also imperative that she demonstrate her efforts to her confessors. However, it is the argument of this thesis that Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio not only elaborated on her efforts to imitate Christ to establish piety, but also as a way of forging an individual identity for herself. This agency is forged not only by her described actions of imitation, but also by the language she uses to express it. This chapter will first explore the devotional work *Imitation of Christ* and the way in which it is reflected throughout Lorravaquio's writing, as well as, exploring why she chose to allow its echoes in the entirety of her work. The synopsis of the devotional work in this section will also further enlighten the reader on the idea of *imitatio Christi* itself which will be the focus of the other two sections of this chapter. The second section of this chapter will delve into Lorravaquio's illness, its relationship with imitation, and how it results in agency. Lastly, an analysis of Lorravaquio's visions will be offered, seeking to explain how her description of visions aided her in developing her own voice.

### **Reflections of Imitation of Christ**

*Imitation of Christ* is a devotional work whose accepted author is Thomas á Kempis. Originally written anonymously in Latin during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Imitation of Christ* was the product of the *Devotio Moderna* movement of which á Kempis was a part.<sup>13</sup> This movement strived to restore tradition and morals to the Church, and as a result, this work focuses on the withdrawal from the outside world and focus on interior life. The text is divided into four books: "Useful Admonitions for the Spiritual Life," "Considerations for Leading an Interior Life," "On Interior Conversation," and "On the Blessed Sacrament and Devout Exhortations for Holy Communion." Each book focuses on a specific aspect of religious life, while building upon

---

<sup>13</sup> Please note that this section is dedicated not to the concept of *imitatio Christi*, but to the devotional work itself.

previous examples in an effort to provide a guide to a Holy life. Due to the fact that colonial women religious strove to lead a Christ-like life, this devotional work was commonplace in colonial convents, read frequently by most of those within their walls. Some of many examples from Lorravaquio's *Vida* of each of these books will be provided in an effort to demonstrate its influence in her writings together with how she utilized these reflections to establish agency in her writing.

"Useful Admonitions for the Spiritual Life" focuses on the withdrawal from outside life and the formation of an interior life while stressing solitude and silence as virtuous behaviors. It is important here to point out that Lorravaquio ingeniously reflects this portion of the text which promotes silence, in her writing, an act that by definition of the Church was not silent at all. The very first evidence of withdrawal from the secular world we see is only a few pages into the first part of her *Vida*. While describing her saint-like childhood, María Magdalena writes:

...empezé á rezár una parte de su Rosario cada dia de rodillas ante una imagen de Ntra.

Sa. que tenia de bulto á quien yo habia cobrado muy particular amor y la tenia en lugar de mi Madre... (fol. 3)

...I began to pray a part of the Rosary each day, kneeling before an image I had in the form of a statue of Our Lady, whom I had come to love very much and I considered Her my own mother...

The most discernable reason for writing these words was to convince her confessors that she had a holy childhood, a cause which it accomplishes by means of declaring her Rosary prayer before the Virgin. However, this statement also demonstrates the first evidence of little María Magdalena dismissing secular life, an action which also indubitably exemplifies piety. By means of her replacing her own mother with the Virgin Mary, Lorravaquio claims to have

removed all ties with her secular family. Be that as it may, I argue that Lorravaquio also takes this chance to demonstrate her ability to act alone. She is the subject of the verb “to begin” which directly results in portraying the idea that she alone did the beginning. True, grammatically speaking a verb must have a subject, but this is indeed the point; María Magdalena had the capacity to begin prayer and she did it on her own accord. Though not directly, this example does follow Weber’s concept of the “rhetoric of femininity.” Lorravaquio evinces humility by ensuring that she includes the fact she knelt to pray, a position of humility despite the reason. However, Lorravaquio does not always display such humility as her contemporaries did.

Almost immediately after this avowal of humility, Lorravaquio elaborates on her call to the faith and her daily habits as a child with the following words:

...Y asi sin qe. mis padres ni nadie me dijera nada empezé á rezár por la mañana un Rosario y otros álas once del día y el tercero álas cinco de la tarde...(fol. 3)

...And so without my parents or anyone else telling me anything, I began to pray a Rosary in the morning and another at eleven, and a third at five in the afternoon...

Though with these words Lorravaquio is following the traditional *Vida* format by demonstrating a monastic schedule even at such a young age, she does so by choice, by complete free-will. In addition to her being the grammatical agent, the subject of the action, Lorravaquio takes special care in reiterating the fact that it was her own will that she began this schedule of prayer. This fact establishes the authority that she had in her own life, the capacity to act alone, while at the same time hiding behind the expected rhetoric of devoutness. Though she includes aspects of the rhetoric of devoutness by elaborating on a monastic schedule, I also argue that this quote is exemplary of her capacity to shamelessly circumvent the trope of humility.

Lorravaquio, however, does not persist in this lack of humility. She continues to reflect on the first chapter of *Imitation of Christ*, and goes on to ingeminate her dedication to religious life by explaining her call to the faith. Lorravaquio writes:

...y allí aunque no oÿ ni ví nada me enseñaron que el camino por donde queria llevar mi alma era por la soledad interiormente hablando y tratando con Dios en ella. Esto fue como si lo estampáron ó selláron en mi corazon. (fol. 4-5)

...And there though I neither heard nor saw anything, they showed me that the path in which God wished my soul to take was one of solitude, internally speaking and dealing with Him in it. It was as if it were stamped or sealed in my heart.

With these words she ensures that the intended reader, her confessors, will see evidence of her solitary life as God instructed; only clarifying her goodness, and at the same time not taking credit for the choice to join a cloister. Here she states that it is a calling, determined by God, not a choice of free-will. However, she then proceeds with the words:

...tan gran enfado con las cosas de esta vida y del mundo que cosa no me daba gusto ni contento ni mas cupo en mí, sino unas ansias por irme ála religion...(fol. 5)

... so much anger with the things of this life and the world that it gave me neither pleasure nor happiness, nor did it sit well with me, but rather it gave me the desire to turn to religion...

This phrasing embodies the first book of à Kempis; Lorravaquio declares her disgust with the outside world and the desire to enter religion as the only way out of such corruption, thus highlighting again her desire to live a virtuous, solitary, interior, religious life as God intended and called upon her to lead. These words, in my opinion, serve a binary purpose, while on the one hand she is clearly conforming to the norms of the time as an obedient woman whose destiny

is to abide a religious life; she also mentions her personal desire for said life. This indication demonstrates the consciousness of her decision, expressing individuality while still conforming to expectations. She is able to assert agency and remain submissive at the same time.

The second book of *Imitation of Christ*, “Considerations for Leading an Interior Life,” gives instructions for peace, purity, and a good conscience while advancing upon guidance on interior life. It highlights the pain and suffering necessary to imitate Christ:

Behold how in the cross there is all and how all depends on your dying there; for there is no other way to life and interior peace except by way of the cross and by daily mortification. [...] No matter how you plan things and arrange them to your liking, you will still find something to suffer, either willingly or unwillingly, and so you will always find the cross. Either you will suffer bodily pain, or you will endure in your soul tribulation of the spirit. (á Kempis 92-3)

These words imply to the reader, that in order to perfectly serve God, one must endure pain and suffering, that it is inevitable, for despite your plans, God’s plans will reign. For me, this is the book of á Kempis which is most reflected in Lorravaquio’s *Vida* as these examples will affirm.

The most directly related examples from Lorravaquio’s text come from descriptions of her illnesses, and the bodily pain experienced because of them. However, only one example will be offered here as there is a section of this thesis dedicated to her illnesses. In the first section of her *Vida*, Lorravaquio is describing her illness (which will be expanded upon later), but continues to explain suffering in her soul. She writes:

...con esto pase tambien muchas tribulaciones en mi alma desamparos y sequedades y en todas solo Dios era mi amparo y el blanco de mis esperanzas y quando mas anegada estaba en el mar destas tribulaciones me socorria mi verdadero Pe. y Sr. con sus

consolaciones de regalos interiores comunicando en mi alma unos ardientes afectos de amor... (fol. 7)

...and with this I also experienced many tribulations in my soul, abandonment and brusqueness, and in all of them only God was my shelter and the object of my hopes; and when I was even more inundated in this sea of tribulations, my true Father and Lord came to my aid with His consolations of interior gifts, imparting on my soul ardent fondness of love...

To ensure her readers that she is experiencing all pain possible, Lorravaquio offers this explanation. In it Lorravaquio conveys to the reader that aside from the physical pain she had to endure, that she also experienced spiritual pain. Turning to the relationship between language and agency as offered by Ahearn, Lorravaquio is the subject of the verb “to experience” and “to be inundated.” She also freely uses the possessive pronoun “my.” Both of these grammatical structures emphasize that she is the one suffering, thus making her the subject of the description at hand. Though a description of this nature is by no means a distinguishing feature of Lorravaquio’s *Vida*, it does offer us an example of how, even in a non-distinct description of tribulation of the spirit, the author is able to highlight her capacity to act.

The third book of *Imitation of Christ*, “On Interior Conversation,” is the longest from the devotional work and illustrates spiritual progress affirming the action of giving oneself to divine will completely, or to renounce oneself completely, to give oneself wholly to God. It is not surprising then, that there is a clear reflection of this content in Lorravaquio’s *Vida*, for she begins the section of her *Vida* about her daily practices with these words:

...me ofresco á su Magd. toda mi alma y corazon y potencias y sentidos y le suplico á ntro. Sr. obre en mi segun su santa voluntad qe. la mia la resigno muy deveras en ella pa.

no hacer, ni querer mas de lo qe. quisiere y mandare en mi...(fol. 12)

...I offer myself and all of my heart and soul and faculties and senses to His Majesty and beseech Him to work within me according to His Holy will, for I sincerely resign my own will so as not to do, nor covet more than which He desires and commands of me...

It is irrefutable that with these words Lorravaquio is completely offering herself to God, as she should according to á Kempis; however, it is significant that she is the subject of the action.

Lorravaquio is the subject, or agent, of both transitive verbs “*ofrecer*” and “*resignar*,” she gives herself and resigns her own will. Her diction in this example signals her conscious decision to do so, and so I deduce also recognizes her own authority and capacity to act. It is ironic that even whilst abdicating her own free will, or agency, Lorravaquio procures that very same thing.

The fourth and final book in the work of á Kempis, “On the Blessed Sacrament and Devout Exhortations for Holy Communion,” explores the precedence of self-offering during the sacrament. One such example in Lorravaquio’s work presents itself in her elaboration of her daily schedule where she also elaborates on specific instances. It is in this section as well where we see first evidence of her visionary experiences. She writes:

Y despues dela comunion me diera el temblor tres dias y el estar como suspendida y enagenados los sentidos en esto suele haber veces mas y otras menos como Dios quiere...(fol. 15)

And after communion, I experienced tremors for three days, and being suspended with estranged feelings, this occurs sometimes more often than others as God desires...

With these words she describes one of her notable tremors and times of suspension where she has completely given herself to God’s will during communion, demonstrating to her confessors her obedience and submission to divine will. Though she does not accept responsibility for said

action, she still sets herself aside by means of her times of suspension, an out of body mystical experience, a way of relating personally with God. As only women were considered capable of such activities, this intimate communication awarded them a certain type of authority (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 15). It was these times of suspension in prayer that led to Lorravaquio's mystic visions, giving her power as a spiritual advisor. More analyses of her visions will be explored later.

To conclude, I trust that exploring the reflections of *Imitation of Christ* in *La Vida de la Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio* offers evidence of how she deliberately gave specific examples from each of its books to develop her own voice, by demonstrating her consciousness. While it is clear that she sought to reflect this devotional work in her writing to prove her worthiness and suit her confessors, I believe it to have also served as a distraction from the authority which she gives herself in all aspects of her life, demonstrating agency through written reflections of what was possibly the most read devotional of the era.

### **Developing an Identity: Illness as Agency**

The presence of illness within a nun's *Vida* is almost inevitable, for it was even desired by most cloistered women (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 181-2). As Lavrin explains "sickness was regarded as a trial of one's patience by God, to be suffered as a part of his omniscient plan for testing a person's mettle" (*Brides of Christ* 180-1). When a nun fell ill, she would often accept her suffering as God's will and did not desire any interference with her health, leaving healing to God and the convent's resources. For a physician or healer to be summoned, a nun must be extremely ill (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 180-1). It is also important to note that the only accepted way for a nun to discuss her body was by describing illness (Arenal and Schlau, "Stratagems" 29). With this in mind, this thesis argues that the *Vida* genre was the only arena for a woman to

represent her own body, even if representing it as frail. As a result, these texts prove to be quasi feminist for their times, as writing women were describing themselves corporeally, a taboo for the era and impossible under any other circumstance. For these reasons, it is not surprising that Lorravaquio describes her illnesses to her confessors. I argue however, that Lorravaquio did so not only to exhibit her capacity to suffer in the name of *imitatio Christi*, but also in an effort demonstrate agency and create individuality. In fact, in her article on Hildegard Von Bingen, Caroline Molina advocates this theory by stating, “references to illness have a particular authority, authenticated, as it were, by the personal experience of the writer” (85).<sup>14</sup> In so many words, she concurs with the fact that texts containing narrations of malaise do indeed project a certain type of agency.

Since Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio was bedridden for forty-four years and three months and fell ill not long after professing in the Convent of San Geronimo, a large part of her life story is dedicated to describing her illnesses which she often explains as a way to endure the suffering in which Christ withstood for her. This interpretation seems most logical following the hagiographical form of the era; in order to fit into the saintly model, one must suffer in the name of God, for as Ibsen confirms “...it is particularly exploited in the lives of female saints” (77). This thesis argues however, that it is indeed her illnesses that give her an individual identity, distinguishing herself from her contemporaries. Though she is by no means the only nun to recount her illnesses in her *Vida*, she is the only one, to my knowledge, to have been ill for so long, to the point that she was forbidden access to monastic functions and daily traditions, which in turn only caused her more suffering. It appears almost as if her illnesses and suffering define her, because their descriptions dominate so much of her text. Even her nephew considered it to

---

<sup>14</sup> Hildegard von Bingen was a German visionary nun who lived from 1098 through 1179. Her mystical writings “abound with tropes of illness” (Molina 85). For further information, please see Caroline Molina’s article “Illness as Privilege: Hildegard von Bingen and the Condition of Mystic Writing.”

be a defining factor in her life, as he includes a note at the beginning and end of his transcription stating the length of time in which she was ill. I state that Lorravaquio uses her illnesses for two main objectives: to mirror Christ's suffering and to define herself.

The concept of illness as *imitatio Christi* is quite prominent among religious writings. This relationship of suffering in the name of Christ has its roots in the writings of Fray Luis de Granada who wrote and meditated on the Passion of the Christ (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 100). His writings inspired others to follow suit, so as Myers explains, "Suffering – and the acceptance of it as God's will – was the essence of *imitatio Christi* and the one path to salvation" (*Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 105). It is not surprising then that Lorravaquio chooses to elaborate on her imitation of Christ. In the first section of her *Vida*, after elaborating on her profession to the convent, she goes on to mention that she experienced a year or more of health before falling ill. The fact that she mentions this at the outset of her life description demonstrates that she too views illness as a defining life factor; a defining factor which she interprets as God's will. She deciphers her pain and suffering as a gift to endure the pain Christ endured for her. She writes:

...luego quiso nro. Sr. a empesarme á efectuar con enfermedades tan grandes qe. he pasado en todo este tiempo qe. teniendome la obediencia ocupada en un oficio me dió mal de garganta...(fol. 7)

...then Our Lord wanted that I begin to experience illnesses so great that while obediently performing my tasks, he gave me a throat sickness...

These words only clarify that Lorravaquio understood her illness to have come from divine will. She further elaborates on her suffering as divine will stating, "...como queria su Magestad fuese esta enfermedad el crisol donde mi alma se purificase..." '...as his Majesty desired, this disease was the crucible for the purification of my soul...' (fol. 7). This statement reaffirms that through

her suffering her soul is on the way to perfection, thus highlighting the positive aspect of her illness and God's intentions. These passages begin the discussion of María Magdalena's illness, ergo setting the stage for a detailed account of illness as a defining factor in her life. However, María Magdalena did not only view her actual illness as suffering; her treatments proved to be torment as well. Lorravaquio elaborates on the remedies for her throat illness:

...me dieron los medicos unos sudores muy fuertes y luego me dieron unciones: despues destas unciones me volvieron á dar otros sudores mas fuertes y visto los medicos qe. con esto no sanaba me dieron un boton de fuego en la mollera qe. me vide en muy gran detrimento y riesgo de perder el juicio... (fol. 7)

...the physicians induced me with very strong sweats and then gave me anointments: after these anointments they again induced sweats, even stronger than before, and the physicians seeing that with these remedies I still did not heal, they gave me a cauterization to the crown of my head such that I saw myself in such grave detriment and at risk of losing my wits...

These very vivid portrayals of her sufferings, though intended to be treatments, evoke in her reader a certain admiration for her having to been able to endure such anguish. Though this passage does indeed conjure reverence for María Magdalena, a lucid display of suffering in God's name, I argue that it also exemplifies her consciousness. Lorravaquio states that this agony almost led to her "losing [her] wits" (fol. 7). This very statement acknowledges the fact that she indeed possesses consciousness, for one must have wits in order to be in danger of losing them. These words embody yet again, Lorravaquio's ingenious use of the "rhetoric of femininity;" she hides behind the concept of imitation to declare her mental capacity as a woman.

After these descriptions, Lorravaquio immediately reverts to assuring her confessors that it is indeed imitation which is the reason for her illness:

...mas su Magestad como queria que todos fuesen instrumentos pr. el martirio qe. queria qe. en esto pasase á su imitacion nada me hacia provecho qe. parecia el Sr. me tenia hechada una soga en la garganta como la que paso pr. mi...(fol. 7)

...but as His Majesty desired that all be instruments of martyrdom, He wanted me to experience this in His imitation. Nothing having pleased me so much as it appeared as if the Lord had a rope around my neck like the one He endured for me...

Here she explains that God desires all to be martyrs and explains how she is suffering as he has suffered for her. By returning to the concept of *imitatio Christi*, Lorravaquio distracts her readers from the identity she is forming for herself by means of her illness. However, in this description her agony is not the focus, martyrdom is, which follows hagiographic tradition. She is representing herself as a martyr, someone who should be revered. This pride does not continue however. Lorravaquio immediately recounts asking God for strength to endure such torment: "...á Dios pidiendole se hiciese en mi su santa voluntad y qe. si era de qe. yo padeciese pr. el todas aquellas cosas á su imitacion me diese fuerza pr. ello..." 'And beseeching God to instill within me His Holy will and that if I am to suffer for Him all of these things in His imitation, that he grant me strength to do so...' (fol. 7). This plea educes weakness and frailty, for Lorravaquio is asking for the ability to endure her pain; she cannot do it without divine intervention. Such a statement reverts to a rhetoric of humility indicating a certain inferiority, reassuring her confessors of her enervations.

This task continues as Lorravaquio offers the reader even more details of the horrors which were her "cures." After an incident where María Magdalena was sure she was on her

death bed, the doctors continue to treat a new development in her illness, one which they are unable to diagnose. Lorravaquio states that it is God's divine will that "...aquello fuera oculto á los hombres..." 'this [illness] be concealed from men' (fol. 8). She accepts that it is not meant that her illness be identified. However, returning to her treatments María Magdalena writes:

...empesaron ellos en mi á hacer pruebas de remedios y determinaron de qe. me sajasen/safasen<sup>15</sup> los muslos y piernas yo sintiendo esta mortificacion y verguenza mucho por haber de estar á la vista de los hombres se lo ofrecia á Dios muy deveras y considerando lo qe. Cristo Ntro. Sr. por mi habia sentido en la columna... (fol. 8)

...they began to perform trial remedies on me and they determined that they would cut into my thighs and legs/dislocate my thighs and legs, I feeling this mortification and embarrassment for having been seen by the eyes of men, I offered it [the suffering and embarrassment] truthfully to God, and considered it as what Christ Our Lord suffered on the cross for me...

With this declaration, María Magdalena ensures that her reader understand the suffering she must endure as a result of her illness. It is a culmination of pain and of suffering which defines her life and her purpose on Earth. This particular passage can be read as another binary example. It exhibits pain and embarrassment, both characteristics of those who are weak, yet at the same time overtly portrays these attributes as *imitatio Christi*. Lorravaquio does not need guidance in understanding her ailments; she is capable of doing so on her own. However, it is noteworthy that she chooses the verb "to consider." The use of this transitive verb alludes to a certain amount of doubt, that is to say, it offers to the reader the possibility of another option, that perhaps her suffering is not God's will. To have the capacity to consider, a person must have more than one

---

<sup>15</sup> Due to the illegibility of the manuscript, it is possible that the writer scribed either of these words. It is hard to decipher, as both verbs fit properly into the description. As a result, I have chosen to offer both as options.

option from which to deduce his/her conclusion. This interpretation removes some responsibility from the author. On the other hand, Lorravaquio's choice of using the verb "to consider" demonstrates her capacity to reflect and contemplate things on an intellectual level, ergo manifesting consciousness. This passage is yet another option of how María Magdalena manipulates her discourse to serve a binary purpose.

Another prideful example from Lorravaquio's *Vida* follows. She expands upon the same series of "cures" by writing:

...determinaron de sobre las sajas me labrasen con cuchillos de fuego cosas tan rigorosa y qe. en este martirio senti muy grandes dolores y pena y estos los pasaba con tanto goso y alegria por qe. los encorporaba con los qe. mi Redemptor habia pasado en la cruz por mis pecados... (fol. 9)

...they determined that over the cuts in my flesh that they would manipulate my flesh with burning knives, something so rigorous, and that in this martyrdom I felt great pain and sorrow, and I experienced them with such delight and happiness because I embodied them as those my Redeemer suffered for me on the cross because of my sins...

Here Lorravaquio declares herself a martyr and states that she suffered in enjoyment as it was the will of God that she do so, to imitate Him. With these words Lorravaquio conveys to the reader great suffering and alludes to the fact that all is God's will, depicting herself as an object of His commands, an action which is sure to please her confessors. However, it can be argued that by comparing herself to Christ, the perfect human form, a man, that she is in turn giving herself authority as a woman who is able to endure such agony.

On another occasion when María Magdalena was certain she was dying, she reverts back to her illness as God's will and if only for an instance, returns to the trope of humility. She

states: “...estando en una muy grave enfermedad muy al ultimo y [...] dandome el Santisimo Sacramento pr. viatico ya disponiendo mi alma pa. qe. en mi se cumpliese la voluntad de Dios...” ‘...being gravely ill, very close to death [...] giving me the Holy Sacrament by viaticum already arranging my soul so that the will of God be fulfilled in me...’ (fol. 51). With these words, Lorravaquio appears to be accepting her fate and surrendering her soul willingly to God as an act of obedience. However, she immediately changes direction and declares:

...y viendome yo en este punto fue tan grande la resistencia qe. tenia de morirme qe. no podia sugetarme y conformarme con lo qe. su Magd. mandaba y ordenaba... (fol. 51)

...and seeing myself at this point, so great was the resistance I felt to perish that I could not subject myself nor conform to what His Majesty mandated and ordered...

This statement is quite bold, for she is disclosing the fact that she resisted God and His orders. One cannot even imagine the reaction of her confessors upon reading this declaration. Cleverly however, María Magdalena immediately retreats and seeks God’s guidance in this delicate manner. She writes: “...estuve en una profunda orasion suplicando a su Magd. me diese conformidad con su voluntad...” ‘I was in a state of profound prayer pleading His Majesty to conform to His will...’ (fol. 51). After forthrightly proclaiming insubordination to God’s will, she immediately withdraws her insubordination and any room for suspicion on the part of her confessors.

Though these are only a few of the descriptions of illness and suffering in Lorravaquio’s *Vida*, they serve to demonstrate how, behind the mask of *imitatio Christi*, she used them to develop a voice for herself. It is evident that by chronicling her sicknesses and consequential suffering, she is highlighting her saint-like attributes; however, I believe that while in essence attempting to fit into the mold of the genre, she in fact gives herself a unique identity.

Furthermore, this incessant transposition between pride and humility in her descriptions distinguishes Lorravaquio's texts from those of her contemporaries. She does not only use the trope of self-deprecation which is expected, she breaks the norms and blatantly exposes a lack of humility, which in itself results in agency. In regards to consciousness and authority as aforementioned, I do believe it was a conscious decision to elaborate on her sufferings which defined her entire life, for even her nephew viewed this to be true. By including the note in the beginning and end of his transcription, he ensures that the reader does not forget the frail physical state of his aunt. María Magdalena hides behind her infirm, frail feminine body while writing her life story which only highlights her mental cognizance and capacities, ergo proving the intellectuality of women.

### **Envisioning Agency: Mysticism and Agency**

Beginning in the fifteenth century in Spain, there was an influx in mystical and visionary texts which was in turn mirrored in the New World (Lavrin, "La Madre" 24). Because the visionary path was a dangerous one, many mystics and visionaries were ordered to write a confessional *Vida*. These requests were to seek out false claims. This judgment was left to the confessor and the Inquisition was to punish those deemed heretics (Lavrin, *Brides of Christ* 107). Alison Weber also elaborates on the Church's stance on mysticism. She states that the relationship between the Church and mystics has been "uneasy" due to the fact that the mystic benefits from direct communication with the divine (Weber 35). This status and consequential power was one of the few areas in which women reigned, as it was determined that women were more prone to the spiritual capacity of mysticism (Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners* 13). As mystics were often ordered to write, we are left with many mystical texts whose authors had direct, non-Church mediated communication with the divine. Due to this fact, there was a need

for a “rhetoric of humility;” however, this humility was often accompanied by authority (Weber 75-6). Arenal and Schlau agree with this concept of authoritative authorship. They state: “the self-assurance gained from the direct communication with the divine led to an increased power of articulation and allowed them to escape the “anxiety of authorship”” (“Leyendo yo” 141). The visionary experiences themselves “allowed women to circumvent patriarchal authority by asserting a direct relation to God” (Ibsen 14). Taking this notion of authority into account, I declare that the very presence of visionary descriptions within a text awards it and its author authority. Furthermore, upon analyzing the discourse used to chronicle these visions, the reader is able to de-mask the “rhetoric of humility” and evidence discursive agency.

Lorravaquio was one of these visionaries and according to Arenal and Schlau, her *Vida* is considered Mexico’s first mystical text (*Untold Sisters* 352). Being a visionary awarded her a certain type of authority during her time, as it allowed her to become a spiritual advisor. It is not surprising then that the largest section of her *Vida* is dedicated to elaborations of her visions. Her descriptions follow a set rhetorical pattern which mirrors the Rosary (Arenal and Schlau, “Stratagems” 35). Her visions often begin with *recogimiento*, which defined Spanish mysticism (Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters* 8-9).<sup>16</sup> She describes them as times of suspension, and/or as times when she is taken to desolate places. These visions leave her in a confused and disoriented mental state and physically trembling. At the end of each description, she repeats a religious rhetoric in which she thanks God for his gifts and declares her desire to serve Him. This section of the chapter will first elaborate on the different types of visions according to the Catholic Church and how visions were perceived. It will then examine written descriptions of Lorravaquio’s visions and how she used them to demonstrate her own voice and agency.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Recogimiento* refers to interior prayer and meditation which was often viewed as suspect due to the fact that the Church was not needed to mediate.

Understanding the Church's categorization of visions is imperative in analyzing Lorravaquio's discourse. According to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, since St. Augustine the Church has deemed there to be three types of visions: corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual. A corporeal vision is defined as follows:

...a supernatural manifestation of an object to the eyes of the body. It may take place in two ways: either a figure really present strikes the retina and there determines the physical phenomenon of the vision, or an agent superior to man directly modifies the visual organ and produces in the composite a sensation equivalent to that which an external object would produce. (Roure)

This type of vision is the least common and the most controversial. The other two types of visions are more common and less suspect of heresy. An imaginative vision is "the sensible representation of an object by the act of imagination alone, without the aid of the visual organ" (Roure). Teresa of Avila categorized these visions as ones seen with "eyes of the soul" (Ibsen 24). Lastly, intellectual visions involve "perceiv[ing] the object without a sensible image" (Roure). In this case, the object cannot be understood in earthly terms; and so it is only sensed, not visualized (Ibsen 24). This division of visions is important in Lorravaquio's *Vida* as I will interpret how she classifies her visions and the importance of said categorization. Lorravaquio begins here descriptions of her mystical experiences by stating that she sees with *ojos corporales*, or eyes of the body. This action was a very bold move on María Magdalena's part as such visions were declared suspect during her times. These visions are categorized as corporeal visions by the Catholic Church. However, as her *Vida* continues, she begins to use the more widely acceptable terminology, declaring to have seen with *ojos del alma*, or eyes of the soul, which are visions deemed as imaginative according to the Church. However, Lorravaquio does

not continuously use *ojos del alma* after first switching. She changes between the two terms as well as often stating to have seen with both kinds of eyes. This concept and its importance will be analyzed along with each individual textual example to demonstrate how her categorizations are related to her agency.

To begin the discussion of Lorravaquio's visions, I will offer textual analysis of her descriptions and focus on the discursive strategies used to establish agency. Though not the first vision to be described in her *Vida*, the first one in the section dedicated to them begins while she is meditating the birth of Jesus in a prayer of *coloquio*.<sup>17</sup> She writes:

...se me aparecio visiblemente qe. lo vi con los ojos del alma y cuerpo un torno, ó como el: y qe. del salia un niño de edad de tres años tan lindo y bello amaravilla muy blanca la vestidura y me miraba con rostro y ojos muy risueño y viendole ibale á coger y en este instante daba la vuelta pr. aquel torno y me dejaba... (fol. 15)

...a lathe, or something like it appeared to me visibly, that is I saw it with eyes of the soul and body: and from it came a child around the age of three very handsome and beautiful, his clothing a wonder and very white and he regarded me face to face with smiling eyes and seeing him, I went to catch him and in this instant he returned to the lathe and left me...

Though at first glance this vision does not appear to be very remarkable, it does offer the reader an example of how Lorravaquio demanded authority in her visions. First, she sees with "eyes of the soul and body." This statement declares that the vision is both corporeal and imaginative. The very fact she chooses to include both convinces the reader of the legitimacy of her vision. Also, from a syntactic standpoint, the lathe and child appear to her and then she sees them. This approach makes her first the object of the apparition before declaring that she is the subject of

---

<sup>17</sup> A prayer of *coloquio* is a prayer in which someone is in a conversation with God.

“to see.” Referring back to Ahearn and how language and agency go hand and hand, by putting herself in two different syntactical positions she is both removing culpability from herself while simultaneously awarding herself the capacity to act, despite the fact that the action is a passive one. Lorravaquio also offers a specific description of the child’s clothing. By adding detail to her description, she awards it more authenticity. Finally, it is important to note that the child glances at her vis-á-vis. This statement provides further evidence that it is a corporeal vision. It reassures the reader that she and the child are together in the vision physically.

Later on in the same section of her *Vida*, María Magdalena goes on to describe a vision where she sees Christ:

...se me aparecio una figura de Xpto.<sup>18</sup> en pie su Santisimo cuerpo desnudo y muy llagado eso era en la divinidad de Dios con objeto y sin objeto y estandole atentamente mirando con los ojos del alma: oy una voz qe. decía esta es mi recamara: Y luego se me desaparecio y buelta desta suspension era tan grande la suavidad de olores qe. sentía en mi alma y aun en los sentidos corporales...(fol. 19)

...And a figure of Christ appeared to me, standing unclothed and bleeding this was in the divinity of God with and without object and regarding him attentively with eyes of the soul: I heard a voice which said this is my chamber: And then he disappeared from me and having returned from this suspension, so great was the sweetness of aromas that I felt in my soul and even with my corporeal senses...

María Magdalena categorizes this vision as an imaginative one which she sees with *ojos del alma*; however, she states that she can sense the aromas corporally as a result of her vision. This fact transposes her statement of seeing with *ojos del alma*, as she also senses things physically. She states that she hears the voice of Christ. Such a declaration could be viewed as suspect by

---

<sup>18</sup> *Xpto.* is an abbreviation for *Cristo*, or Christ (BYU).

her confessors, but she does not appear to incorporate any self-deprecation or “rhetoric of humility” to compensate. It is also notable that she sees “...Dios con objeto y sin objeto...” (fol. 19). This wording refers to the fact that Lorravaquio sees God’s divinity with and without body. To see God in physical form, or with object, was much less common because such divinity is thought to be incomprehensible to humankind. This declaration reiterates the divine gifts which María Magdalena possesses and the intimate communication she has with the divine.

Further on in the section of her *Vida* where she describes her visions, Lorravaquio returns to the phrasing “vi con los ojos corporales” (fol. 25). This vision begins after having been in prayer and contemplation about the Passion for two hours (fol. 24). María Magdalena writes:

vi con los ojos corporales pasar a Xpto. Ntro. Sr. como quando andaba en el mundo con su tunica morada y aunque no via bien su Santisimo cuerpo: mas de las gargantas de los pies o un poco mas arriba via los pies mas albos qe. un cristal y muy bellos y parte dela tunica y como paso tan aprisa se me iba el alma tras del con unas ansias de amarle e imitarle en todo y pr. otra parte muy confusa conosiendo mi vaxesa y lo que yo por mis pecados merecia. (fol. 25)

I saw with corporeal eyes Christ Our Lord pass by like when he walked the Earth with his purple tunic, and although I did not see his Holy body clearly: but [rather I saw] from the insteps of the feet or a little higher, I saw feet whiter than crystal and very beautiful and part of the tunic and as he passed by so hurriedly, my soul followed him with desires to love him and imitate him in all things, and conversely very confused knowing my inferiority and that which I deserved for my sins.

This particular vision abounds in discursive strategies which award Lorravaquio a certain authority. First, this vision is seen with *ojos corporales* which again echoes her spiritual

capacity to physically see Christ in human form. However, she almost immediately states “no via bien su Santísimo cuerpo.” This about-face is strategic on her part. Lorravaquio goes from a bold authoritative statement to an almost immediate retraction in which she returns herself to a humble state in an effort to portray humility to her confessors. She then continues by offering her reader more visual details from her vision to authenticate it, as it were. After this effort of corroboration, María Magdalena explains that her soul, not her body follows the fleeting Christ, stating her desire to “amarle y imitarle.” This statement is quite repetitious in the descriptions of Lorravaquio’s visions. After each vision, she states this desire. This action serves to portray her piety and follows hagiographic tradition. However, the last phrase in this description is of most interest and full of irony. María Magdalena declares to have been left “muy confusa.” This acknowledgement displays insight into María Magdalena’s consciousness as a woman and as a writer; an action which recognizes her mental and intellectual capacities. However, this same statement serves as a self-deprecating remark. By declaring to be confused, she avows to her incapacity to understand what she, a humble woman, just experienced. Lorravaquio returns to a “rhetoric of humility” to distract her confessors. She further elaborates on this rhetoric by proclaiming her “vaxesa” ‘inferiority’ and “pecados” ‘sins.’ This example also serves to mimic hagiographic form, establish piety, and highlight humility. However, through this mask of humility Lorravaquio’s consciousness remains visible, as the eyes always do behind a mask.

Returning to a vision with “eyes of the soul,” María Magdalena appears to be less bold in her statements at first glance. However, upon reading between the lines, the reader is able to recognize a lack of humility. Being in a prayer of *coloquio*, María Magdalena enters one of her states of suspension. Her vision begins: “oy dos voces juntas y qe. en colloquio me hablaban...” ‘I heard two voices together and in colloquium they spoke to me...’ (fol. 42). Though María

Magdalena does not declare to have seen with corporeal eyes, she does declare to hear voices, returning to a physical description of her vision. After declaring that she was in a state where she appeared to be dead, she describes her return to the physical world:

...volvi de la suspension conociendo aquellas dos voces eran del hijo y la Me. qe. asi se estampo y sello en mi alma pr. una verdad muy clara y amandolos con unos encendidos afectos les suplicaba no me desamparasen sino qe. en todo me favoreciesen dandome gracia pa. servirles perfectam.te...(fol. 42)

...I returned from my time of suspension knowing that these two voices were of the Son and the Virgin so much so it was stamped and sealed in my soul because of a clear truth and loving them with burning affection, I beseeched them not to abandon me but rather that in all things they favor me giving me the grace to serve them perfectly...

These words again boast consciousness by declaring that she knew from whom the voices came. Furthermore, this averment demonstrates a certain lack of humility. María Magdalena does not doubt what she heard, ergo informing her reader she is perfectly capable of interpreting this vision on her own accord. Following suit of many of her other descriptions; María Magdalena almost immediately revisits the trope of humility. She again declares her love for Christ and the Virgin and then begs them to favor her. However, she asks for the “gracia pa. servirles perfectam.te.” This diction implies that Lorravaquio believes she is capable of serving them perfectly, without error. Though perfection is always the goal, to declare it a possibility for a humble nun is to boast that she is capable of this perfection. This gasconade in itself resorts back to a lack of humility, for she declares her capacity for perfection.

With this vision, as in many others, Lorravaquio attempts to hide behind religious rhetoric, though often lacking the trope of humility, to actually make a name for herself, doing so

consciously and demonstrating agency. Her choice to describe visions as being seen with *ojos corporales* is itself a bold statement with an absence of humility. As Ibsen explains, “the repression of physical sight was [...] an admirable sign of humility” (103). Based on this statement, I surmise that the fact that María Magdalena often sees with *ojos corporales* is one of her ingenious discursive strategies to award her text more authority; for even when she declares to see with *ojos del alma*, she includes other corporeal senses to describe her visions. She never fully represses her physical senses to ascend into the spiritual world. She cannot rescind her physical self completely. This inability draws me back to her illnesses and how they are inevitably intertwined with her visionary world. In her article on Hildegard von Bingen, Caroline Molina states: “in her self-referential writings, illness is defined as the precondition for mystic expression, and thus central to the “being” of the mystic identity itself” (85). I concur with Molina’s statement relating illness and mysticism, for it is certainly true in the life of María Magdalena. Her visions are often triggered while in extreme pain and suffering, or while experiencing tremors. It is not shocking then that many of her visions surround the theme of the Passion; after all it was one of her favorite devotionals. However, as the Passion is the essence of Christ’s pain and suffering I argue that these visions are a reflection of her own infirm body. After all, even Lorravaquio herself declares her suffering to be *imitatio Christi*.

One such vision is described in the first section of María Magdalena’s *Vida*. However, the vision itself is not what is most notable; it is the descriptions of her trials. After comparing her suffering to that of Jesus Christ and elaborating on her “cures,” María Magdalena explains that often times while in a prayer about the Passion or in one of *coloquio* she would return from her visions with tremors. These tremors were thought to be the result of demons. She writes: “...qe. estaba endemoniada qe. no era mal natural sino qe. el diablo qe. tenia en el cuerpo

causaba en mi aquel temblor...” ‘that I was possessed by demons, that I was not physically ill, but rather that the devil which was in my body caused my tremor...’ (fol. 9). This statement highlights the suffering Lorravaquio endured emotionally in addition to her physical ailments. Her companions suspected her to be possessed and did not warrant her visions and tremors as veritable. As a result of this suspicion, the powers that be decided that María Magdalena should be examined to determine the cause and veracity of her tremors. She explains:

...asi determinaron conjurarme y puesto pr. obra entro uno de mis perlados [...] mi confesor [...] y con el entro el Sr. Dr. Cadena persona muy docta y muy santa y examinandome asi en publico como en secreto y empesando su conjuro me hablo muy á solas [...] los asegura no era demonio el qe. causaba aquellos afectos ... (fol. 9-10)

...and so they determined to exorcise me and responding to the order entered one of my prelates [...] my confessor [...] and with him entered Señor Doctor Cadena, a very learned and saintly man, and examining me both publicly and privately and beginning his incantation he spoke to me intimately [...] he assured them that it was not a demon which caused those tremors...

This description offers her readers insight into the scrutiny she underwent to prove her authenticity of being a true visionary and truly being ill. I believe that Lorravaquio chose to include this description to establish from the beginning of her writing, the suffering which defined her entire life. It is important to know that despite the declaration made by her confessors, Lorravaquio continued to be suspected of heresy and demonic possession which she continues to explain throughout her *Vida*. She would later on be beaten as punishment as well as forbidden from certain monastic functions including confession which in turn only caused her more distress (fol. 10). These punishments were ordered by her superiors. It was these types of

descriptions which drew me to study Lorravaquio. The fact that she was able to endure such torment physically and emotionally proves her strength. She chooses to highlight these downfalls as self-representation and reminds the reader of her suffering, thus forging an individual identity.

Throughout her *Vida*, Lorravaquio continues to expand upon her visions which resulted from her illnesses. María Magdalena herself links illness and vision by writing:

Estando otra ves en una muy grave enfermedad ya en lo ultimo de mi vida esperando la hora de mi muerte y estando en una profunda oracion apersibiendome y resignandome en las manos de Dios se hiciese en mi su voluntad = Oy una vos interiormente qe. me decia aun no es hora mucho le falta qe. padecer y luego empecé á mejorar. (fol. 16)

Being again gravely ill, already in the last moments of my life, awaiting the hour of my death, and being in a profound state of prayer acknowledging it to myself and resigning myself unto the hands of God that he would do His Holy will within me = I heard a voice inside me that said that it is still is not time, you still have much to suffer and then I began to recover.

In this description of one of her visions, María Magdalena defines a clear relationship between her illness and this particular vision. This description also serves to demonstrate her willingness to offer herself completely unto divine will which highlights her piety, referring back to *Imitation of Christ*. She also uses one of the five corporeal senses in this description, which authenticates her vision; however, she states to have heard within herself which regresses the statement to a more humble declaration. Finally, she attests that this voice foresees more suffering in her future and declares it to be the reason she does not perish at this time, again defining her life with *imitatio Christi*.

However, returning to the concept of María Magdalena reflecting her own infirmity to the body of Christ, I will analyze one of her earlier visions. María Magdalena declares that while in prayer and contemplation of the Passion, the crucifixion in particular, she entered a state of suspension, as she often did in her visions. She describes the vision as follows:

...vi con los ojos del alma muy distintamente como si corporalmente lo viera á Xpto. crucificado en una cruz muy grande y muy sangriento y herido y vi á ntra. Sa. al pie de la cruz con un manto azul cubierta y tan goteado de la sangre que de la cruz caia que estaba toda muy llena della y con manos altas para recibir aquel precioso cuerpo; y aunque muy afligida muy bellisima que los via yo muy distintamente... (fol. 17)

...I distinctly saw with the eyes of the soul, almost as if corporeally, I saw Christ crucified on a very large cross, very bloody, and wounded, and I saw Our Lady at the foot of the cross with a blue cloak covered and dripping with blood which had fallen from the cross which was covered in it, and with hands raised to receive that precious body; and although very distraught, she was very beautiful, for I saw them distinctly...

As the subject of this vision is the crucified Christ whose body is bleeding, it can be compared to María Magdalena's body which due to her "cures" was constantly bleeding or exuding other bodily fluids. Lorravaquio also strengthens this description by stating that she saw so clearly that it appeared to be of the physical world. She reiterates this clarity twice in this very short description. Such validation aids in the removal of doubt of the reader ergo giving the text license.

However, María Magdalena does not only see a wounded Christ in her visions. There are other examples of her seeing injured and bleeding people and animals. One such vision occurs

while in a prayer of *coloquio*. María Magdalena is praying for an unnamed person in need and enters another state of suspension:

...vide uno como trono y en el á Dios con objeto y sin objeto qe. aunque distintamente no via la persona de Dios bien conocia mi alma era su Magd. en divinidad y estando atenta con los ojos del alma mirandole derepente se ponía en su presencia una ovejita, esta mas parda qe. blanca con una profunda humildad la cabeza muy baxa, y su cuerpo todo y caveza herida y muy sangriente... (fol. 22-23)

...I saw something like a throne and on it, God with and without object, though I did not distinctly see God in bodily form, my soul knew it was His Majesty in divinity, and being attentive with the eyes of my soul watching Him, all of a sudden a small sheep appeared in His presence. It was more brown than white with a profound humility, the head lowered, and his entire body and head wounded and very bloody...

María Magdalena interprets this sheep to be representative of the person for whom she is praying and continues her prayer for him. However, though the vision begins with a vision of God, it comes to include an image of a wounded, bleeding, brown sheep that appears humble. I argue that this image is another clear reflection of María Magdalena's own wounded body in her visions, for after her "cures" her body is left in a constant physically impaired state, with abscesses leaking blood and other bodily fluids. As a result, she is left in a state of humility, giving herself completely to God and His divine will. She accepts her suffering as *imitatio Christi* and even views it as a gift from God to endure the pain He endured for her.

María Magdalena's visions defined her as much as did her illness. As a matter of fact, her illnesses and visions are inseparable and undeniably linked as evidenced above. The fact that the largest section of her *Vida* is dedicated to describing her visions tells the reader that María

Magdalena recognized that she had a special gift and wanted to share it with her readers. Within these descriptions, she often thanks God for his many gifts again recognizing that she is distinctive. The very fact that she acknowledges to have received divine gifts is in turn a way of demanding recognition. It could be argued then that by requesting such admiration, María Magdalena is ignoring the trope of humility to a certain extent. Lorravaquio also consistently sees with *ojos corporales*, and even when she does not, she incorporates other physical senses to authenticate her visionary experiences. It is true that there is a reflection of baroque imagery in Lorravaquio's visions. This fact is not surprising for as Ibsen explains, "...the use of conventual imagery was an effective way to convince the reader of the validity of her visionary experiences..." (101). This validation proved to ring true as it was less suspect if a visionary mirrored actions of saints before her (Ibsen 101). María Magdalena then also utilized the imagery available to her within the convent walls to further authenticate her visionary experiences which led to her authority as a spiritual advisor. María Magdalena was not alone in the visionary path to power as women from multiple backgrounds gained authority through mysticism (Powers 202-3). However, my argument is that not only did María Magdalena gain authority as a spiritual advisor during her time because of her visions, she also awarded her text and her life more authority. She utilized accepted imagery and discursive strategies to authenticate her visions, validate her writings, and further forge her identity as a conscious, educated woman, capable of self-representation by means of the written word.

### **CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSIONS**

As the goal of this thesis was to investigate how Lorravaquio expresses agency, authority and power throughout her *Vida* by means of *imitatio Christi* and descriptions of her visions and illnesses, I have offered multiple textual examples and accompanying analyses to explore this

proposal. If we consider agency to be solely “free-will,” it is difficult to declare that María Magdalena’s actions were all a result of her agency, for many of her defining features could be considered as out of her control, such as her illnesses. However, if we take into consideration the other definitions and explanations of agency, especially in terms of language, it is undeniable that Lorravaquio’s text does indeed exude agency in several ways. Madre María Magdalena is able to forge a unique identity for herself by means of elaborating on her illnesses and visions and the associated *imitatio Christi*. She mirrors discursive strategies from her contemporaries and predecessors such as Teresa of Avila, yet at times, completely strays from portraying herself as a humble woman, and demands recognition for her pain and suffering, as well as her innate divine gifts.

The *Vida* of Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio is also distinguishable from those of her contemporaries because it lacks detail about monastic functions. She does not elaborate on her novitiate period, nor does she offer the reader details about conventual life. She rarely speaks of interactions with other nuns within her convent, for they are only mentioned briefly. In fact, the only person to person contact she elaborates on involves her confessors or her doctors. Her visionary world is where we find most interactions in her life story. This fact only confirms that her visionary world and her illnesses were her reality, her world. Due to her illness and the fact that she was bedridden, María Magdalena was unable to attend monastic functions and interact with others within the convent. This lack of communication inevitably resulted in a sense of loneliness which is also clearly reflected in her visionary world, for she is often taken to a desert-like place alone in her visions. Despite the fact that this concept of loneliness does evoke certain sadness in the reader, Lorravaquio does not dwell on her desolation as unpleasant. María Magdalena incorporates the notion of seclusion with the recommendations given to her in

*Imitation of Christ*. She transforms her solitude into obedience and perfection in spiritual life. It should be noted however, that this loneliness was unavoidable as she physically could not interact with others without assistance. María Magdalena, however, does not elaborate on this fact in her *Vida*. Through discursive genius, Lorravaquio molds her weak and frail body, her definitive illnesses with the image of a crucified Christ, ergo linking her malaise with *imitatio Christi*. Her “tremors” even carry her into her spiritual world at times. As a result of this discursive strategy, María Magdalena is able to defend her frail human form and confirm her spiritual and intellectual authority.

By means of an act of obedience, writing her *Vida* at the request of her confessors, Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio develops her own voice, thus demonstrating her consciousness as a woman and as a writer. The fact that María Magdalena was literate and capable of writing, and did indeed write, advocates the importance of education for women, even if only subtly. As a result, I conclude that Lorravaquio’s *Vida* can indeed be viewed as a quasi-feminist text. To determine the feminist quality of this text, I turn to “Early Feminist Theory and the “Querelle Des Femmes”” by Joan Kelly. If we take into consideration Kelly’s definition of feminist texts as “reinterpretations of the record on women,” then it can be argued that not only does María Magdalena’s text offer us a reinterpretation of the life of a religious woman; she offers her reader an autobiographical account (20). Though subject to multiple patriarchal authorities such as the Church and her confessors, she is able to represent herself as a saintly figure, someone who should be recognized for said quality. This representation contradicts the patriarchal view of women as evil beings which has its derivations in the story of Eve and the fall of humankind (Lerner 7). Her infirm body which could easily be linked with evilness and inferiority is transformed into a divine gift, though not without trials. Though she strives to prove her saintly

merits and convince her confessors of her piety, I conclude that she employs discursive strategies to distract from the authority she awards herself in all aspects of her life. María Magdalena demonstrates consciousness by means of the binary action of writing, an act of obedience to her confessors, though against the rulings of the Council of Trent. As a result, Lorravaquio attests to the authority attainable by a woman in her situation. Even a bedridden nun, seemingly without power or agency, had the power of the word in writing, culminating in a *Vida* that will never be forgotten.

## REFERENCES

- À Kempis, Thomas. *The Imitation of Christ: In Four Books*. New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1993. Print.
- Ahearn, Laura M. "Language and Agency." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 30 (2001): 109-137. *JSTOR* Web. 04 Feb. 2014.
- Araya Espinoza, Alejandra. "La Mística y el corazón: una tradición de espiritualidad femenina en América Colonial." *Cuadernos De Literatura* 14.28 (2010): 132-155. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.
- Arenal, Electa, and Stacey Schlau. "'Leyendo Yo Y Escribiendo Ella': The Convent As Intellectual Community." *Letras Femeninas* 1 (2006): 129. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences VI*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.
- . "Stratagems Of The Strong, Stratagems Of The Weak: Autobiographical Prose Of The Seventeenth-Century Hispanic Convent." *Tulsa Studies In Women's Literature* 1 (1990): 25. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences III*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.
- . *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in their own Words*. Revised Edition. Trans. Amanda Powell. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.
- BYU. "Abbreviations." *Challenges*.  
 <<https://script.byu.edu/Pages/Spanish/en/chabbreviations.aspx>> Web. 10 Sept. 2013.
- Couturier, Edith and Asunción Lavrin. "Las mujeres tienen la palabra: Otras voces en la historia colonial de México." *Historia Mexicana*. Vol. 31, No. 2 (1981): 278-313. *JSTOR*.
- Ibsen, Kristine. *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999. Print.

- Kelly, Joan. "Early Feminist Theory and the "Querelle Des Femmes", 1400-1789." *Signs* 8.1 (1982): 4-28. *JSTOR*. Web.
- Kirk, Stephanie. "Introduction: A Tale of Two Communities." *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007. 1-16. Print.
- Lavrin, Asunción. *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. Print.
- . "La Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio y su mundo visionario." *Signo Histórico*. Núm 13 (2005) : 22-41. *JSTOR*.
- . "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico." *The Catholic Historical Review*. Vol. 58, No. 3 (1972): 367-387. *JSTOR*.
- Lerner, Gerda. "Chapter 1 Introduction." *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993. 3-20. Print.
- Lorravaquio Muños, Madre María Magdalena de. *Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesada del Convento del Sr. S. Geronimo de la Ciudad de Mexico hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio, y de Ysabel Muños su legitima mujer*. 1650. Manuscript. University of Texas, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection.
- Molina, Caroline. "Illness As Privilege: Hildegard Von Bingen And The Condition Of Mystic Writing." *Women's Studies* 23.1 (1994): 85. *Sociological Collection*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.
- Myers, Kathleen Ann. "Crossing Boundaries: Defining the Field of Female Religious Writing in Colonial Latin America." *Colonial Latin American Review*. Vol. 9, No. 2 (2000): 151-165. *JSTOR*.

---. *Neither Saints Nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Print.

*New King James Version Holy Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. Print.

Ortner, Sherry B. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

Powers, Karen Vieira. *Women in the Crucible of Conquest: The Gendered Genesis of Spanish American Society, 1500-1600*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. Print.

Roure, Lucien. "Visions and Apparitions." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 15. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 8 Aug. 2013.  
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15477a.htm>>.

Weber, Alison. *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.