Review/Reseña


**History, Biography and the “Lady in Blue”**

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Several clusters of disconnected entities have a vested interest in the “Lady in Blue,” the Spanish nun María de Agreda (1602–1665). In some parts of the United States Southwest she is a regional heroine, due to tales of her miraculous appearance to Jumano Indians in the 1620s. Pockets of devotees in the US Midwest (the author, Marilyn H. Fedewa, is a university administrator in Michigan) and in Spain itself are currently working for her canonization, despite the confusing obstructions put in place by Pope Benedict himself.
Maria de Agreda: Mystical Lady in Blue should find many readers in New Mexico and Texas, where the potential saint is a figure of historical importance. However, this author had something other than regional history in mind. Fedewa, clearly personally inspired by her subject, argues that María’s “experience was universal” and that María’s writings on the Virgin Mary invite “all of humankind to follow in her footsteps, call[ing] us to claim the birthright of our unlimited potential” (6). Although a reviewer cannot judge how successful the book was in carrying out this ambition, Fedewa does manage to fill out a compelling, three-dimensional character, usually in the words of the Lady in Blue herself. It is impossible to say whether or not this portrayal will inspire Catholics or non-Catholics interested in mystical experiences. However, this reader did finish the book with a great deal of respect for the brains, rationality, patience and persistence of María de Agreda. Although the author is not trained as a historian or a literary scholar, her simple translation and straightforward presentation of María’s words left a strong impression.

This book narrates several critical phases in the life and afterlife of María de Agreda, beginning with her youth and her inspiration to turn her family home into a convent. Not long after the convent’s construction (with some miraculous help along the way, including angelic construction workers who left town before being paid), María’s mystical experiences heightened, and she “bilocated,” appearing simultaneously in New Spain and in a trance in her own cell. Given the difficulties in travel and communication in the 1620s, these experiences became notorious gradually and, over time, contributed to María’s fame. Despite her reputation, in her twenties, María preferred to focus on her duties as a young abbess. Her highest priority was writing a mystical biography of the Virgin Mary. This book argued for the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. Over twenty years after the events allegedly took place, a judge from the Spanish Inquisition tribunal interrogated her over the bi-locations and her as-yet-unpublished writings on the Virgin. María adroitly handled these interrogations, earning a great deal of respect from the inquisitors. From her late thirties until her death, she also carried the heavy burden of a correspondence with King Philip IV adding up to 600 total letters. As a
kind of conclusion to the book, Fedewa devotes a few final chapters to the difficulties involved in canonizing María, an unresolved case to this day.

At first glance, a king depending on a mystical, bilocating cloistered nun for policy advice seems laughable. But after reading the selections from their letters included in this book, one sympathizes with María and realizes that the king was lucky to have such a kind, calm, patient friend. As an advisor, she was far more sensible than the king and undoubtedly less corrupt and self-serving than his other favorites, most infamously the Conde Duque de Olivares and later his nephew don Luis de Haro. Philip certainly did not deserve her efforts. Only a saint or someone extremely devoted to the Spanish people could have put up with the king’s constant self-pitying rants about his weakness and sinfulness. He even had the audacity to send her (a woman who prayed almost the entire night on an empty stomach) a Baroque-style alarm clock, to make sure the nun did not sleep too long and forget to pray for him (218). The Virgin herself felt obligated to urge María to patiently forgive the king’s continuous relapses (218). María listened, consoled and advised Philip because she wholeheartedly believed that God punished Spain, shaken by rebellions in Catalonia and Portugal as well as the Dutch occupation of Brazil, due to the king’s immoral behavior. María even had some power over Philip beyond the spiritual and moral realms. She was well-connected to certain figures in the court and pushed for peace with France, less devastating taxes for the poor and harsher treatment of abusive nobles.

During some of the time of her correspondence with King Philip, María lived in fear of the Spanish Inquisition. She worried about the fact that the king held onto an unofficial ms. copy of her biography of the Virgin. The calificadores might find this copy, judge some of her statements as heretical, and severely punish her. The inquisitors also looked askance at the stories of her bi-location to New Mexico. In the early 1620s, María commonly fell into mystical trances and was said to levitate. She also told her confessors about the strange lands she saw during her trances. From 1620 to 1623, a group of indigenous Americans received numerous visits from a Lady in Blue. This woman preached to them and encouraged them to go to a mission for baptism. They did not make it to the
mission until 1629. By then María’s superiors had passed on knowledge of her trances to the Archbishop of Mexico. In 1631, one of the friars who had spoken to the Jumano people came to Agreda and drew up an account of her experiences. He was wildly enthusiastic, jumping on every detail and rumor in the convent, eager to promote his mission in this difficult region of New Spain. The young María did not have the acuity to correct him, and signed off on his account. Nearly three decades later this document haunted her, in the form of an 11-day session with the Inquisition.

On the flimsy pretext that María was involved in a plot against the king, an inquisitor questioned María for dozens of hours. She was not tortured, but was forced to kneel in the convent library for the entire time. María’s character comes to life in these chapters, as Fedewa presents the interrogation as a dialogue in the first person. María carefully prepared herself for the interrogation by bringing a notebook summarizing her attitudes and experiences. Ignoring her prepared written statement, the inquisitor methodically took her through eighty complex questions. In terms of her bilocations, he tried to trip up María by honing in on the practical impossibilities. For example, did she see the ground she covered as she flew through the air to New Mexico? Did angels really carry her? How did she manage to take along rosaries? Did time pass at the same rate in each place where her physical body was present? These kinds of questions went on and on, but María gave sensible answers without seeming defensive. Usually she just corrected the exaggerations made by the friar who recorded the experience or other nuns. Her explanation, that her mystical experiences were not always physical, but were sometimes “mental” or “imaginative” (176), indicates that she wanted to deemphasize her miraculous powers and the physical impossibility of these occurrences. This attitude makes her more appealing to a reader in our century. Day after day, María skillfully handled this interrogation, until by the end she seemed to be instructing the inquisitor. He left with a glowing opinion. In his written summary, he even seemed slightly ashamed that María had been questioned at all (192).

Experts in four specific fields of academic scholarship are familiar with the Lady in Blue, but have very different reasons for their interest in
her, none of which necessarily coincide with the goals of the author of this book. These include: historians of the United States Southwest and borderlands, literary scholars who focus on Spanish and Latin American nuns’ writings, and historians of seventeenth-century Spain. Lastly and most obscurely would be those scholars interested in religious history and doctrine, especially the gradual acceptance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, which was officially approved by Pope Pius IX in 1854. However, this book may frustrate a reader trained in these academic fields.

Speaking as a historian who concentrates on the seventeenth-century Spanish-speaking world, in my view this book’s most significant shortcoming was the disregard of secondary sources relevant to the topic, making the historiographical angle seriously out of date. While Fedewa warns readers that her book is “not a scholarly treatise,” she does aim to “reconstruct through systematic research...a spiritual and historical background to set the stage” (xvi). Although her bibliography includes a couple of works of scholarship published more recently and she knows all of the scholarship specifically dealing with María, much of her general historical information comes from secondary sources at least fifty years old. Significant sections of the book draw from three sources: Martin Hume’s *The Court of Philip IV: Spain in Decline* published in 1907, Henry Charles Lea on the Spanish Inquisition (1922) and John Elliott’s *Imperial Spain* (1966). A simple library catalog search of the subject heading “Philip IV, 1621-1665” results in over thirty books in English and Spanish written since the publication of *Imperial Spain*. Although Elliott’s book is worth citing, Hume’s title alone shows his bias.

To her credit, Fedewa generally adheres closely to her primary sources, especially María’s letters and theological writings, and therefore the book rarely parrots the gloomy, muckraking anti-Spanish attitudes seen in some of the older English-speaking historians. In fact, Fedewa goes too far in the opposite direction. She tempers Hume’s lurid accounts of scandal in Philip’s court with the guarded and staid discussion of “sin” in the king’s letters to María. But when the book discusses Philip’s marriage to his niece, Fedewa unnaturally withholds judgment, simply citing Hume’s account
that the king referred to his wife (approximately thirty years his junior) as one of the other “girls,” along with his daughters (208). María congratulates him on his marriage, although she must have known the strict Catholic laws against consanguinity to the fourth degree. Fedewa also completely ignores the issue of the severe mental and physical problems suffered by Carlos II, the product of this marriage and Philip’s successor, simply stating that “Carlos II was not a strong ruler” and then repeating the cliché of Spain’s rapid “decline” without directly linking Carlos to this vague prognosis (242). However, Carlos (known as el hechizado) did play a significant role in the story of María de Agreda. He, or the advisors who spoke for him, supported her canonization case, and the young king even visited her body with his half-brother, the illegitimate (and much more vibrant) don Juan de Austria. Fedewa covers up Carlos’s shocking medical issues by mislabeling a painting of the king and don Juan posing with María’s body (247). The caption asserts that the handsome young man is the king, and the boy with facial deformities is don Juan. I cannot imagine the author’s motivation for misrepresenting these historical facts; Carlos was impotent and has no descendants who might take offense at an accurate portrayal of his problems.

Readers interested in women’s history and writings will also find it frustrating that Fedewa ignores the multitude of other women who had experiences and output resembling that of María de Agreda. The author stresses that María’s confessors warned her that “women in the Church do not write” (225). It is misleading to give her a singular position, either as a mystical female advisor to a Spanish monarch/regent (notable cases go back to the era of the Catholic Kings—one could even say this was the norm in early modern Spain) or as a powerful holy woman. It could be argued that much of María de Agreda’s persona, writings, reputation and even self-presentation derived from the influential model of Teresa of Avila. With slight specific variations, the two lives are virtually mirror images. It is also relevant that Philip III and his family had strong connections to a convent in Madrid, and either the King or the Queen visited nuns on almost a daily basis. A bit of historical background would have helped place María’s experiences in context.
Despite these flaws, this book will certainly satisfy readers seeking a spiritual biography of a unique woman who played a fascinating role in the politics of her time while maintaining her personal beliefs. The book is easy to read, despite its frequent dependence on words written in the seventeenth century. In general, the author’s enthusiasm and respect for the subject outweighs the occasional error of historical presentation.