

# The Materiality of Meaning

## Identity and multiple-authorship in Sor María Manuela de Santana's Spiritual Letters

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the discourse in the eighteen spiritual letters Sor María Manuela de Santa Ana (1695–1793) wrote to Father Pedro Loayza, the originals of which are compiled in Volume II of her compiled writings, as a study of identity and female agency by the writing subject. Discussion focusses on the double-voiced nature of these texts as their discourse negotiated the fine line between “being heard” and “being rejected” by male readers within hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the Early Modern period in Peru.*

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SOR MARÍA MANUELA DE SANTA ANA (1695–1793) WAS BORN María Manuela Ignacia Teresa Hurtado de Mendoza e Iturrizarra in Lima, Peru. At fourteen years of age, she entered religious life as a black-veiled nun in the Convent of Santa Rosa de Santa María in Lima where she lived until her death at age ninety-eight. Mandated by her confessors,<sup>1</sup> she wrote about her life in various types of texts: a *Vida*, poetry, and letters. The originals of many of her writings, along with other important documents about her life, were compiled into two volumes (I and II) by a series of editors, some of whom have been identified and others that remain nameless.

The first tome of manuscripts contains the manuscript of her *Vida* (1r–11v), the glosses of several of her letters to her main confessor, the Mercedarian Father Pedro Loayza (12r–13v), and official correspondence between her and ecclesiastical authorities of the time (14r–30r). Her business letters indicate that her financial acumen enabled her to conduct profitable

1. María Manuela's confessors were Manuel Salazar, Jesuit; Juan de la Melena, Mercedarian; Juan José Guizado, Mercedarian; Juan de Cañas, Franciscan; and Manuel Sánchez, Dominican. All five reported to the Mercedarian Pedro Loayza, who became María Manuela's main confessor near the end of her life (ARMACANQUI 1999, 117).

ventures that benefited both her and her convent. The last section of the first volume contains transcriptions done in the XVIIIth century of the records of her birth as well as of her religious profession. The second volume, entitled *Esquelas originales de correspondencia espiritual y poesías místicas* (1r–33r), consists of the original full text of numerous spiritual letters that Sor María Manuela wrote to Father Loayza, several folios that appear to have been part of the *Vida* (21r to 25v, 28r to 28v), her mystic poetry (26r to 26v, 30r to 33v) and, at the end, a few loose pages (143–44). Both volumes are hand-written on *pergamino* and bound in leather. The books are housed in the library of the cloister at the Convent of Santa Rosa de Lima (ARMACANQUI 1999, 22).<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Elia Armacanqui's rare and timely entry into this archive, her edition of these two tomes provides us with a unique opportunity to examine the Early Modern female religious writing subject in Peru (ARMACANQUI 1999, 22).<sup>3</sup> María Manuela is one of a very few religious women whose texts survive from colonial times until today.

This paper examines the discourse in the eighteen spiritual letters María Manuela wrote to Father Pedro Loayza, the originals of which are compiled in Volume II, as a study of identity and female agency by the writing subject. Discussion focusses on the double-voiced nature (SHOWALTER 1981, 180) of these texts as their discourse negotiated the fine line between “being heard” and “being rejected” by male readers within hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the Early Modern period in Peru. Like other women writers during this time, María Manuela used what Arenal and Schlauf call stratagems of the weak in order to placate the reader, appear submissive, and fall within his expectations for women in the contemporary church. Alongside these, she also used stratagems of the strong to create agency and write her identity into the letters, developing a rhetorical strategy which allowed her to comply with the demands of her addressees, while communicating a sense of identity independent from the authority these figures represent (ARENAL and SCHLAU 1989, 2). In this way, she subverted the Church hierarchy as well as the patriarchy.

As Jack Stillinger points out, however, all texts are products of multiple-authorship (STILLINGER 1991, 18). M. Thomas Inge defines multiple-authorship as “any number of discourses that take place among the writer,

2. No entry is permitted into this archive. It is understood to contain a history of the convent, as well as compilations of texts written by nuns during the colonial period. It may also contain financial records, as well as miscellaneous papers.
3. For her doctoral thesis, Elia Armacanqui transcribed and edited both volumes and later published her work in ARMACANQUI 1999.

the political and social environments in which the writing occurs, the aesthetic and economic pressures that encourage the process, the psychological and emotional state of the writer, and the reader who is expected to receive or consume the end product when it reaches print" (INGE 2001, 623). The issue of multiple-authorship affects María Manuela's texts in several important ways. First, Early Modern women were taught that they were inferior in every way to men. From their early education as well as from other cultural and societal messages, women internalized this sense of inferiority, and their voice became "ventriloquized: it spoke the truths of the male-dominated culture into which she was born, giving the daughter precious little of what might have connected her to the body, the earth, or companionship with fellow human beings" (EL SAFFAR 1994, 4). The Post-Tridentine culture in which María Manuela grew up and wrote was devoid of images of female power and generativity. Her sense of *self* as we come to know her in her spiritual letters, therefore, is fragmented and indicative of this deep cultural unbalancing, where factors of power made "femininity" and "masculinity" absolutes that served to diminish, if not abolish altogether, the individual woman's sense of self (EL SAFFAR 1994, 5–7).

Writing often represented an externalization of the issues of self, and, as El Saffar points out, many women who wrote reported an improvement in the internal turmoil from which they suffered. However, during María Manuela's lifetime, women were not permitted to write except at the behest of their confessor. María Manuela's texts, therefore, are products of an extended dialogue with her confessor. More than any of her other writings, her spiritual letters share stories and a depth of raw emotion that at the time placed both her and her confessor in a vulnerable position with regard to the Inquisition. In particular, these letters detail her mental prayer, visionary activity and the gifts she received from God through the mystic process (*vías purgativa, iluminativa, y unitiva*). María Manuela felt insecure about these experiences, fearing they were the work of the devil and not God. Feelings of guilt, desperation and anxiety pervade the discourse in the letters.<sup>4</sup> They exhibit what María Zambrano calls the double process of confession: the confessing subject wishes to hide from him/herself while simultaneously searching for something that will relieve the guilt (ZAMBRANO 2007, 57–79). María Manuela frequently states that conversations with her confessor, or writing him a letter when she could not meet with him in person, provided the only consolation in her dark moments of

4. Gilbert and Gubar discuss the anxiety of authorship for women in GILBERT and GUBAR 2000, 26.

conscience. Occasionally Loayza would answer in writing in order to guide her spiritually. Often he would answer orally, keeping her letters for further study.

Another important aspect of multiple-authorship in María Manuela's spiritual letters is the presence throughout of unidentified editorial hands, who may have been other confessors, church officials, compilers or even Loayza himself. The nun we have come to know as María Manuela, therefore, is the product of the editing subject, who imposed his own agenda on her texts in order to show in clear terms that the nun's life was exemplary and worthy of imitation by others seeking salvation. We may imagine therefore a culling of the primary material so that the letters, when compiled, would follow this agenda closely. Our conclusions in this study must, of necessity, be partial, but I believe María's spiritual letters have a great deal to tell us about the tasks performed by the editors such as they reveal themselves in Volume II of her works.

Critics aver that by the eighteenth century letter writing was a common and accepted way for women to express themselves. According to Asunción Lavrín, nuns' epistolary endeavors probably numbered in the thousands and can be divided into two categories: letters dealing with material issues and letters about spiritual matters (LAVRÍN 1995, 43–44).<sup>5</sup> María Manuela wrote both types of letters; however, more of her spiritual letters have survived than her business correspondence. As a colonial discursive genre, the epistolary is considered the space in which writing subjects contest identities and conduct power struggles (DÍAZ 2010, 137). Letters written by nuns to their confessor(s) may, at first blush, suppose a private communication of confidence between two individuals. In fact, these letters often became part of the public exchange of knowledge, and were often shared among confessors and other Church officials (DÍAZ 2010, 140). In the convent, letters were used to establish a relationship of authority on the part of priests and subordination on the part of nuns, and were predicated on loyalty.

Nevertheless, according to Myers, nuns would regularly manipulate the rhetoric of the discursive genre to obtain their epistolary objectives (MYERS 2003, 17). Thus, María Manuela's spiritual letters participate in what Lavrín calls the protagonism of the female subject while assuring that the senders' complaints would be heard (LAVRÍN 1995, 59). By means of the written letter, then, María Manuela exercised agency with an authority

5. Mónica Díaz adds a third category, letters that touch upon both spiritual and material issues (DÍAZ 2010, 136).

denied to most secular women (DÍAZ 2010, 136–37). Her spiritual letters demonstrate her mastery of classical rhetoric in epistolary composition. They also show her ability to combine classical rhetoric with other religious and cultural elements such as the rhetorical conventions and language of the *Vida*, the hagiographic biography, the sermon and the legal defense in order to tell her story (DÍAZ 2010, 135).

The identity study that María Manuela undertakes revolves around her spiritual experiences. She began to write her spiritual letters after the death of her previous confessor, Thomás Cañas, in November 1776. With the arrival of her new confessor, Pedro Loayza, María Manuela began a period of great spiritual development (*Vida* 8v). While her spiritual letters are not dated, we can speculate that she wrote to Loayza throughout a two-year period, as evidenced by information she gives in one of her later letters, “en estos sesenta i ocho años que a que [e]stoi en esta S<an>ta Relijión” (20v). From eighty-one to eighty-three years of age, then, the nun received such superior guidance from Loayza that she underwent a cataclysmic spiritual experience. Using as her model the *moradas* of Saint Teresa of Ávila, she employs the allegory of the *four chapels* or *cuatro capillas* to describe the *vias místicas* (*la purgativa, la iluminativa y la unitiva*) of this period in her life. The letters discuss her progress toward salvation, and stop well before her death at age ninety-eight.

Despite a lack of historical referents and external chronology, María Manuela’s spiritual letters provide us with an understanding of her life-style, including illnesses, visionary experience, her relationship with Loayza, and her special connection to God. Her writing style is similar to that of the *Vida*, in which colloquial language predominates. Writing like she speaks, she connects ideas as if she were telling us a story. At times, particularly after 9v, her sentences are incomplete and the narrative line is difficult to follow because, as she explains, her failing health in the midst of more intense visionary activity does not allow her to be more consistently coherent: “[e]n toda esta noche la pasé sentada con muchas aflisiones sin consuelo” (10v). Nevertheless, her letters demonstrate both the life of the eighteenth-century female visionary as well as the tradition of rhetorical strategies developed by women and passed down through the centuries.

María Manuela’s confessional letters follow most of the prescribed structures of the era, including church rhetoric, formulas, and themes. However, if we remove these texts from that “rigid framework, [they] reveal patterns that contradict their stated intentions and express, instead, the author’s individuality” (ARENAL AND SCHLAU 1989, 2). María Manuela’s spiritual letters make use of a particular set of rhetorical strategies identified by

Sarah Owens as common to colonial nuns' correspondence and their art of persuasion (OWENS 2000, 114–20). While the strategies are interconnected, it is possible to identify those used with greater frequency and those used less often. In the case of María Manuela, the most common rhetorical strategy in her letters is the use of visions to explain to her confessor her mystic union with God. The next most common strategy is the use of *captatio benevolentia*. Related to the rhetoric of humility common to *Vidas*, it is the use of self-deprecating statements as a means to counterbalance the questions of orthodoxy in her visionary experiences. Next most frequent is the use of *imitatio Christi* as a means to do penance and pray. María Manuela also employs the corroboration of the Saints and the Virgin Mary, as well as *salutatio*, wishing good health to the addressee of the letters.

### Visions and Identity

All of María Manuela's spiritual letters employ mystic visions to describe her intimate contact with God. The writing subject develops a first-person character, I/María Manuela, who is both narrator and protagonist of the events recounted: "Oí [God] me [h]a metido en la infinidad de sus grandezas. Me [h]a metido en la bodega de sus binos" (1v). Her character is completely overwhelmed by divine grace during the moments of mystic contact; she often nearly loses consciousness, becoming weak and confused. She nevertheless portrays herself in a position of strength before God and her confessor. She states that God has placed her on the road to salvation: "Mientras estube engolfada estube mui asegurada que iba bien" (1r). If she continues along His path, her salvation will be assured. She is now less fearful of being fooled by the devil and at least in spiritual matters shows greater self-confidence. For it is her good intentions that far outweigh any overstepping of bounds in her relationship with God: "Tengo intención re[c]ta i que no deseo mas que la gloria de Dios i el bien de las Alma[s]" (1v), which have been richly rewarded by intimate contact with God.

From this privileged position, María Manuela begins to *actively pursue* mystic union with God. In a particularly graphic moment in the second letter, Jesus is laying on her pillow, love-sick and eager. María Manuela clearly states: "me lo llebé a la quarta capilla" (3v). For her, union with the divine (*cuarta capilla*) is paramount and the thought of it consumes most of her waking hours. In fact, most of the visionary experience María Manuela describes occurs in the *cuarta capilla*, where intense and repeated mystic unions consume her: "El biernes a las dies de la noche me ensendió la

misericordia del Señor mi Alma i corasón en un bolcán de fuego. Los afetos i deseos fueron con mucha ilustración mui grandes” (19v) and “Cuatro días a que la misericordia de Dios me tiene metida i cubierta en el mar infinito de su divinidad, [me tiene] abiertas todas las puertas de su misericordia(s), i así está mi espíritu bolando a todas partes sin inpedimento. Las ilustraciones i contemplaciones son mui altas. Las uniones con la Divinidad i Umanidad son continúa[s], especialmente por la mañana i a medianoche . . . los misterios de Nuestro Señor [son] gososos, dolorosos, i gloriosos” (20v). María Manuela often uses the language of the *Song of Songs* to express the intimate nature of her relationship with her Lover: “Al istante yegó su rost[r]o al mío i me osculó el cariyó” (18r).

María Manuela often calls her confessor “en espíritu” into her visions. For example, during a particularly intense moment of mystic contact, María Manuela drinks the blood of Christ from the wounds on his feet, an act of communion and union. Immediately she states “. . . llamé a mi Confesor en espíritu y le dije: ‘ministro del S<eñ>or toma deste né[c]tar de micericordia,’” in effect offering communion to Loayza in an interesting reversal of ecclesiastical hierarchy (3r). As spiritual adviser to María Manuela, Loayza’s character often becomes privy to mystic moments that as a human being he could not experience: “La misericordia de Dios i María S<antí>s<i>ma me mostraron i me entraron [i] qué grandesa de portal [!], [i] qué Reina tan [h]ermosísima, poderosa, i benina[!], [i] qué corona tan rica, qué ermosura, con qué amor nos metió en su corasón [¿a Usted?] i a mí antes de naser nuestro Salvador” (12v). Here Loayza and María Manuela have achieved union with the Christ child in Mary’s womb prior to His birth, a particularly poignant image of baroque spirituality, holiness and future sainthood.

María Manuela’s relationship with God is such that He grants all her wishes. This is of particular importance when she prays for Loayza: “Mucho le clamé a Dios por Usted. Mucho le pedí i todo me lo consedió, que así me lo dio a conoser” (15v). Of course, her most fervent request is salvation, for Loayza and for herself, which God grants without question: “Me aseguró [God] también la salvación de Usted i la mía . . . Después me yebó al cielo con Usted y puse su espíritu de Usted en la misma palomita blanquita, i Nuestra Señora dentró a Usted en su corason i Nuestro señor en el suyo” (15r). In her role as intercessor with God, María Manuela is already doing the work of a saint here on earth.

As a result of her portrayal as a *predilecta de Dios*, the writing subject in the letters blossoms as agent of her own actions. Along with guaranteed salvation for herself and others including her confessor, María Manuela’s

character continues to receive countless *luces* and *misericordias* that further emphasize her privileged relationship with God: “El S<eñ>or sea serbido de todo, que sea su Mayor Gloria que sólo me [ha] [e]legido . . .” (3v). She understands these privileges to include permission to undertake what at that time was reserved only for men, the ability to preach and convert souls to God: “. . . que me [ha] de conserder los pribilejios que le pido que mi espíritu esté [h]asta el fin del mundo sujetando a lusifer para que no [h]aga ofender a su Magestad por todo el mundo [h]e de andar” (11r). While here she states that she understands this can only happen after her death (*mi espíritu*), there lies beneath the discourse a circuit of power that connects this moment with other moments of strong agency throughout the text when the nun engaged in priestly activity. We recall her offering Loayza communion in mystic union with God, for example.

### *Captatio benevolentia*<sup>6</sup> and the Rhetoric of Humility<sup>7</sup>

Each letter insists on the antithesis of María Manuela on the one hand as a woman chosen by God and on the other as a miserable, morally reprehensible human being. This use of *Captatio benevolentia* or the rhetoric of humility ensures that the strong agency depicted in the mystic visions is counterbalanced by frequent claims of humility and frailty: “. . . y deseo y que me colme de mucha y profunda humildad, y todas las Virtudes que adorne mi pobre alma para que más y más la una a su Magestad amén” (3v). María Manuela frequently cites her confusion and feelings of guilt about the spiritual life she is living and describing: “Ya no puedo ya estar mi Padre en esta vida. Estoi muy aflijida no puedo esplicar todo lo que me [h]a pasado i conosido” (1v). Use of *Captatio benevolentia* ensures that

6. Beginning in the XIth century, and growing out of classical oratory, the *Ars dic-taminis* provided for *captatio benevolentia*, a particular rhetorical aspect of letter writing designed to secure the goodwill of the reader (PERELMAN 1991, 98). In the Early Modern Era, religious women following the stylistic example of Teresa of Avila, built upon *captatio benevolentia*, giving voice to the rhetoric of humility.
7. Alison Weber uses this term to describe in the writings of Teresa of Avila the stylistic techniques of humility, irony, obfuscation, and humor. She notes how this nun correlated them with social variables, adopting linguistic features associated with women--affectivity, spontaneity, colloquialism--in order to gain access to the realm of power associated with men (WEBER 1996, 24).

her letters are accepted by her readers because they conform to the proper formula for the rhetoric of persuasion.

*Captatio benevolentia* generally occurs in those moments when agency appears to have overrun its bounds: “Vi [a Dios], especialmente en la Cuarta capiya, celebrando el desposorio con esta infame bieja [emphasis added]” (17v). María Manuela repeatedly points out that she fears temptation by the devil, and prefers to die, a request God has not granted her: “Me espantó el demonio aparesiéndoseme con mucha variedad muy Venerable y me dijo quera maldita de D<io>s y yo le dije q<u>era el pobre mal[dito], que yo era bendita de su M<ajes>tad por su micericordia y otras coasas q<ue> me manda la Obediensia y me dise mi Director q<ue> él no puede en mí por las micericordias del S<eñ>or y hullo luego que le dije esa palabra” (22r). It is particularly prevalent in those letters in which María Manuela takes on duties typically belonging to men, such as ensuring Loayza’s salvation: “Mi p<adr>e mucho temor tengo de desirle a Usted estas cosas porque no me bienen a mi que soi mui mala” (9r) and “Ya me enpiesa la repunnancia de enbiarle a Usted este papel. Usted me tiene mandado se lo diga todo. Tube mucha istancia para escribirle a Usted este. Ya le quedo a Dios pidiendo a Dios le dé a Usted lus para que conosca Usted lo mala que soi, tan miserable que no meresco nada” (7r). With each mention of wretchedness, the level of anxiety in the letters rises.

For María Manuela, in addition to fear of the devil’s influence, writing itself is great cause for anxiety. She states that she writes out of obedience to Loayza, which she equates to obedience to God: “Yo mi P<adr>e con bastante cortedad estoi dando cuenta desto aunque no se puede desir todo lo que [h]ago por obedeser a Usted i por pareserme que [e]s boluntad de Dios, que así lo [h]aga” (15r). Yet, in every letter, the nun struggles to explain her experiences and suffers from being unable to put into words what she is feeling. Her anxiety is palpable as she tells Loayza that he is her only consolation: “Mi corasón me llora Sangre de no poder ablar aora con Ud. No tengo otra lus para mi seguridad” (1v). She repeatedly pleads with him to pray for her salvation as she worries she will be forever damned for her sins: “Clámele Usted a Dios mucho por mí” (5r). Her insecurity takes her over as she cries: “Mui aflijida estoi, i se me a sentado todo, i me entregado con la intensión re[c]ta para todo resibiendo mucho consuelo mi Alma de que por mi [h]a de ser Amado Nuestro Criador i redentor”, and she ends with a plea to Loayza “No me deje Usted de responder” (11r).

Loayza answers her pleas for his attention by writing back to her. A very few of his short letters to the nun are included in the volume and their texts bear out the tender understanding with which Loayza treated her: “Mi mui

amada en el Sor. Quedo enterado en él de Ud. y lo que le digo es que se sosiege, porque nada es engaño que así me lo ha dado Dios a conocer” and i: “. . . siga Ud. sin novedad entrando en sus Capillas y demás exercicios que pueda, asegurada en la palabra Divina de que nunca le ha de faltar” (243–44). María Manuela exhibits particular humility in the moments she acknowledges his correspondence: “Mi P<adr>e yo quedé ayer muy consolada con todo lo que Usted me enseñó y me [h]abló las berdades. Quedé mui agradecida a Usted por la caridad con que me be i enseña. Quedé tan alentada con el consuelo, que luego me puse a resar, i pude resar todo, i aser todos los exercicios . . .” (15v).

She credits Loayza’s exceptional skill as a confessor as the reason she was able to achieve union with God: “Y todo esto me [h]a pasado con muchas y lustraciones y sertesa de los misterios. [H]a resivido mucho el alma q<ue> Ud. sabe entender y yo no esplico más pues las locusiones son más altas y uniones más superiores que se dejan menos entender” (3v). He has been her rock, and she reveals to him many of her insecurities regarding her visionary experience: “Ya me enpiesan los temores. [¡Ai!] mi P<adr>e pídale Usted a Dios me acabe de sacar desta vida en su S<an>ta María” (8v). Her humility before Loayza seems hyperbolic in that she repeatedly self-deprecates despite ample experience to the contrary: “Mi P<adr>e soi una bestia y no me cé esplicar” (8v). However, perhaps it is due to the knowledge that moments of strong agency in which María Manuela learned directly from God with no need for her confessor or the Church challenged his authority directly, necessitating ample rhetoric of humility to assuage the reader.

### *Imitatio Christi*

The third rhetorical strategy prevalent in María Manuela’s spiritual letters is penance or *imitatio Christi*. María Manuela never mentions the harsh *disciplinas* such as self-flagellation, hair shirts or other “bloody” punishments common among women spiritual autobiographers. Instead, her suffering in the letters revolves around more emotional matters. While she does claim physical illness as a factor, the bulk of her *way of the cross* consists of the anxiety and fear that constantly accompany her spiritual development and mystic experiences. She recounts moments of high ecstasy such as: “La misericordia de Dios i María S<antí>s<i>ma me mostraron i me entraron [¡]qué grandesa de portal[!], [¡]qué Reina tan hermosísima, poderosa, i beninal[!], [¡]qué corona tan rica, qué ermosura, con qué amor nos metió en su corazón [¡a Usted?] [Loayza] y a mí . . .” (12v), usually followed immedi-

ately by a discourse of abject fear and frailty: “Dios me acabe de sacar desta vida. No puedo mi P<adr>e estar más en eya, muchos peligr[os], muchos temores” (1r).

Given that she writes these texts in her eighties, some of her frailty could be explained by the aging process. In fact, in some of the letters, the text is confusing and difficult to read: “Dio perisia en sermón q<ue> [h]iso el P<adr>e a toda la corte celestial de lo q<ue> le [h]abía agradado con la prenetrasión q<ue> su M<ajes>tad le dio aserca de una ynquietu grande de persevirse [en de ladrones que pademos.] . . . sobre todo de los . . . que viendo los hombres y fue tal lo q<ue> me fundió en mi alma(s) . . .” (21v). It is also possible, however, that the discourse here is so diffuse because she attempts to write during moments of mystic union.

It is not suffering per se but the strategic placement of suffering as a rhetorical device in the letters that grabs our attention, however. After nearly every mystic experience, María Manuela exhibits sheer terror and desperation for her salvation: “Pero padesco mucho, todo me parese ser engaños i mentiras. Yo estoi vien fatigada de Alma i cuerpo” (16v) and “Este camino es de muchos temores. Yo no puedo bivar esto” (17v). Ironically, then, it is the mystic contact with God that María Manuela most seeks that causes the terrible suffering she undergoes. The prolonged bouts of anxiety take a terrible toll on the nun: “Mi P<adr>e ya no tengo fuersas para las aflisiones que padesco ya artos . . .” (18v) and the often repeated “No puedo más” (14v).

While María Manuela relies on Loayza for reassurance, even that small comfort begins to crumble in some of the letters. She apologizes repeatedly for bothering him with her complaints and focusses the blame on herself: “Tenga Usted presente que tengo una imajinasi3n mui biva, mui pasiandera i introducida para que Usted determine si es de Dios lo que me pasó anoche” (18v). She so fears damnation as an *ilusa* that she again begs Loayza to pray to God. After four days of constant and intense mystic contact, she does not ask for prayers for herself, however, but for Loayza, so God will tell him exactly how to help her: “Mi P<adr>e pídale Usted mucho a Dios le dé a Usted conosimiento. *No me baya a perder* porque [esto es mucho sin imajinaciones [emphasis added]]” (20r).

The nun’s descriptions of emotional torment become a type of *imitatio Christi* because by portraying herself in a constant state of fear and suffering she claims authority from their mutual experience. Like Christ, she suffered a type of Calvary, and like Christ, she offered her suffering up to God amidst overwhelming sadness and anguish: “He tenido una representaci3n de toda mi Vida en los padecimientos de amor y temor que me da su

M<ajes>tad a entender, que se [ha] agrado de todo esto, y que [he] sido mártir por el amor y el temor. Y que se [ha] agradó de que todo esto pase a solas y en silencio, que nunca busqué consuelo mas que con el Director y a en desirle lo q<ue> por mi alma pasaba me [ha] costado mucho” (4v). Like Christ as well, she submits in each letter to God’s will, and she both experiences mystic union and suffers the travails involved in the guilt and anxiety that experience causes her. The rhetorical strategy of penance here allows María Manuela to make the unorthodox statements about agency that would likely have been unacceptable without this tool.

### The Virgin and the Saints

The corroboration of events by the Virgin Mary and other saints is another rhetorical strategy used frequently by María Manuela. In most of her spiritual letters, the nun provides holy witnesses to the occurrences in the *capillas* or steps toward mystic union: “. . . me yebaron aqueya contemplan-sión altísima de los querubines y serafines con mucha bibesa, claridad i amor. A estos erigió en que me pusieron un altar delante de Jesús i María, i San Pedro me dijo [¿muera?] con mi P<adr>e S<an>to Domingo, i mi Padre San Agustín. San Pedro me dio la comunión. Mi P<adr>e S<an>to Domingo me puso el paño. S<a>n Agustín me yegó un baso con un licor. Se me puso era la sangre de Nuestro Redentor” (8v). Such corroboration counterbalances the heterodoxy of many of her statements about direct contact with God. It also strengthens her position as one chosen by God because the saints witness her as a product of God’s handiwork: “Oí al [h]aser la segunda comunión que fui a la Yglesia con toda la posesión de los S<an>tos Obispos y San Benedicto en el púlpito bolbió a (r)repetir las mic-ericordias que el S<eñ>or h[a]se con esta pobresita su criatura” (2v).

In numerous letters, María Manuela greatly oversteps orthodoxy. Here, for example, she claims that she has already confessed her sins, but not to Loayza. Instead, she has unburdened herself directly to God, who has already forgiven her: “Y tambien colocaron [the saints and divine witnesses] a su Ma<jes>tad en las custodias de cada capilla, y allí el P<adr>e eterno me absuelve y bendise muchas beses” (2v–2r). He has even given her communion, a gift that can only be enjoyed by a pure soul: “Y todos binieron a las capillas con el S<eñ>or Sacramentado, y salió de la Custodia, y se le dio al P<adr>e Eterno, y me comulgó disiéndome su M<ajes>tad que lla no[ ]hisiese sino amar y agradecer y que dejase así mi alma” (2v). The Virgin Mary also plays a special role in María Manuela’s spiritual develop-

ment for it is she who ensures the nun's religious profession. In fact, the Mother of God sponsors the nun directly: "Me dio el hábito y la profesión la S<anti>s<i>ma Virgen me amadrinó" (21v). She, along with the Celestial Court, engage in battle with the devil for María Manuela's soul, ensuring her salvation: ". . . a las dies de la noche deste día se me formó un bulla de . . . y artillería, disparos y . . . que creo [h]abía guerra y mucha tribulación que me levantó y peleó con la corte Celestial que estaba a mi favor" (21v).

The actions of a confessant could, however, negatively impact a confessor, particularly where questions of orthodoxy were concerned (MORGAN 2002, 19). Therefore, in spite of the divine witnesses María Manuela calls upon in her correspondence, Pedro Loayza inserts in several key places clarifying commentary designed to deflect any potential criticism. In each comment, he repeats that the nun's experiences are not of the mind but of the spirit: "es todo espiritual". He explains who her divine witnesses are: "Los Santos obispos que aquí cita son: S<a>n Agustín, San Ambrosio, S<an>to T(h)oribio y otros q<ue> le acompañaban en sus ejercicios espirituales" (3r). Loayza also testifies to the orthodoxy of María Manuela's mystic unions: "No nos debe admirar que se hechase [Christ] con ella en la almohada, pues éstas y otras muchas finesas ha hecho con bastantes almas, y se leen muy repetidas en los sagrados Cantares, sin questo derogue nada de su infinita pureza . . . El ósculo expresamente consta en los mismos Cantares . . ." (3r). Loayza corroborates the experiences María Manuela narrates, while protecting himself from undesirable attention by Church authorities: "[1]^Lo que dice en orden a mí debe entenderse espiritualmente, por los ruegos de esta su sierva en que no ai repugnancia para q<ue> se haga aunque sea con un pecador como io" (9r).

### *Salutatio*

*Salutatio* is a greeting or content that wishes the good health of the addressee, and is often related to the opening or closing of a letter. Most of María Manuela's spiritual letters open with "Viva Jesús", a typical greeting within the religious context of her writing. Many letters are not signed and do not contain a closing, perhaps because they are segments of other letters or texts. Those that bear a signature close on a note of humility, with María Manuela placing herself in a position of absolute subservience to Loayza, "Su hija i Sierva", "Su sierba i hija", or "Su sierva". In María Manuela's spiritual letters, *salutatio* is not restricted to the beginning or end of the text.

Instead, her good wishes for Loayza occur regularly throughout the body of the letters.

On many occasions, the nun states her wishes of peace, grace and the help of God for her confessor: “lo [he] estado i estoi clamándole a Dios mucho por Usted que le dé a Usted todo lo que Usted desea i yo deseo para Usted, i que le preste a Usted mucha bida para que le dé muchas Almas . . .” (16v). She particularly requests a long life for Loayza so he can save many souls. She also wishes him good health: “. . . i que le alibie a Usted sus trabajos de su cuerpo . . .” (16v) and a quick recovery from illness: “Abíseme Usted también si Nuestro Christo me [ha] condesido el darle a Usted algún alibio, que desde el martes [he] estado aflijida i le [h]e clamado a Dios mucho por Usted . . .” (16r).

The five rhetorical strategies discussed here were woven by María Manuela into her spiritual letters because she felt she had to justify her motives for writing down personal thoughts and feelings, most especially those that would threaten the male hierarchy of the Church. As Sarah Owens points out, it is not the act of experiencing a vision or practicing *imitatio Christi* that constitutes rhetoric. It is the act of writing down these experiences to achieve a goal, such as the justification of ideas or conduct, that converts the actions discussed above into rhetoric (OWENS 2000, 116). In her spiritual letters, María Manuela intertwined her own ideas with the prescribed formulas of the era, obedience and accepted religious doctrine, resulting in a discourse that encoded her experiences as a nun in such a way as to avoid condemnation by the Inquisition or her confessor. At the same time, such encoding allowed her to speak her mind regarding her most intimate spiritual experiences, thereby communicating a sense of identity by means of a discourse that makes whole the fragmented self in the text.<sup>8</sup>

As Donadey and Lionnet point out, speaking or writing about the past can bring to light the voices and agency of those forgotten and effect healing in order to prevent trauma such as that undergone by María Manuela under patriarchal, tridentine society from recurring (DONADEY WITH LIONNET 2007, 229). María Manuela struggled to write a version of her *self* by means of acts of identification and differentiation (SMITH AND WATSON 2001, 32). As autobiographical acts, therefore, María Manuela’s spiritual letters involve a first-person protagonist/narrator whose discourse constitutes an identity whose production is “never complete, always in pro-

8. Berthold discusses in depth the process by which talking and discourse lead to wholeness of the speaking/writing subject (BERTHOLD 2009, 299).

cess, and always constituted within . . . representation” (HALL 1997, 392). If this is true, then the discourse in María Manuela’s spiritual letters plots points on a map of female identity that speak to women’s roles at the time she was writing. Since women were not protagonists in the narratives of Conquest, their total dedication to the Church inspired their imaginations and allowed them to plot themselves into mystic narrative, where, as Jean Franco points out, “self-effacing heroines and the feminized figure of Christ displaced the hero and the militant clergy” (FRANCO 1989, xv). In point of fact, María Manuela’s spiritual letters tell of repeated moments when her life was transformed by divine illumination and the bizarre behavior of her body during mystic experience.

The main characteristic of María Manuela’s character in her spiritual letters is her agency. Bolstered by the five rhetorical strategies studied above, the nun bypasses her confessor and forms a direct relationship with God, a matter she unabashedly confesses repeatedly. She solidifies her position of strength by stating that God grants all her wishes, including salvation for her confessor. She describes in detail her most intense mystic experiences, and turns Church hierarchy over by behaving like and doing the work of a priest, preaching and saving souls. By identifying her suffering with the passion of Christ, María Manuela embraces loss and pain and comes to see mystic union as a return to the comfort and reassurance of a loving mother embodied in Christ (PETROFF 1986, 44). In warm embrace on the lap of her savior, María Manuela understands mystic union as a means to restore the relationship between herself as daughter and the nurturing of a personal mother symbolized by the breasts, arms, and kisses of the feminized Christ: “Lla creo que [he] dicho que cuando me [h]iso la merced de ponerme a su Divino costado y tomar de aquel Néctar suabísimo” (3r). That is to say, the writing subject, fragmented by the trials she experiences in patriarchal culture, achieves wholeness through union with God.

We recall here also that the writing subject of the spiritual letters created her first-person character in part to enter into a quest for the *other*, the addressee of the letters (ROBOREDO SEARA 2012, 363). Written one by one, each letter re/establishes communication by María Manuela with her confessor, thus constituting a genuine expression of dialogic communication between sender and addressee. Stated another way, the spiritual letters of María Manuela capture her *self*, and their discourse shapes the identity of the writing subject *vis a vis* her confessor. As narrator and protagonist, María Manuela conducts a personal self-examination that “legitimizes the paradox of communicating the discourse of absence and, simultaneously, the desire for presence and dialogue” (ROBOREDO SEARA 2012, 364). In

other words, her “I” develops in function of Loayza’s “you” and demands his attention. The constant reciprocity between sender and receiver fuels the alternation of roles as writer becomes reader of the response, and reader in turn writes an answer back. The ensuing dialogue is an enunciation in which time focuses on the present, reaching occasionally into the recent past or near future. It is unfortunate that only two of Loayza’s responses have survived. They appear in Volume II, but are very brief. His non-surviving letters and the conversations he had with María Manuela would surely provide a great deal of concrete information about not only their relationship but about the agency she so unabashedly exhibits in her spiritual letters to him.

## The Process of Compilation

Our study thus far has given us a great deal of insight into María Manuela’s voice, albeit mediated, in her spiritual letters. We will now examine the process by which María Manuela’s individually written spiritual letters were compiled, effectively moving them from works to text.<sup>9</sup> Our conclusions, of necessity, will be partial ones, but I believe we have much to learn about her spiritual letters if we examine them with a mind to identifying the presence in them of other (not María Manuela’s) editorial hands and voices. We will see how compilation changes the meaning of the letters and how it affects issues of identity in the discourse.

As we stated earlier, María Manuela’s spiritual letters are texts of multiple authorship in which the voices, markings, and influence of numerous editors, some identified but most unidentified, reveal themselves in the material aspect of the contents of the letters.<sup>10</sup> According to Elia Armacanqui, María Manuela’s spiritual letters in the manuscript were written in her own hand, but not dated. Since the numeration of folios was done during the compilation process, the letters we read may appear in the order they were written, the order they were received (which is often the case), or in some other order yet to be determined. In this regard, Armacanqui has identified the most likely compiler of the letters as Chaplain Father Baltasar Moreno. At the behest of María Manuela’s nephew and his wife, Moreno gathered María Manuela’s written work, selected and ordered the

9. G. T. Tanselle states that we must recognize the partial nature of any text *vis a vis* the work (TANSELLE 1989, I).

10. C. Deirdre Phelps makes this point regarding early modern English texts (PHELPS 1994, 61).

documents, and probably numbered and bound them as part of the one-year anniversary of her death in 1794.

From these compiled documents, which include all the contents of Volumes I and II, the priest who would give the sermon at the one-year mass could select important information about the deceased nun and possible candidate for sainthood (ARMACANQUI 1999, 243). In a note by Baltasar Moreno included in Volume I, he admits that he based his compilation on specific criteria. For him, María Manuela's life was an example of *imitatio Christi* of sufficient importance so as to merit its own hagiographic biography: "Los demás papeles van separados no son necesarios para el Sermón. Podrán servir para escribir su vida, si Dios dispusiese o moviese a alguno que emprenda este trabajo" (ARMACANQUI 1999, 176). The documents in Volumes I and II were, therefore, compiled with this end in mind.

According to Armacanqui, Baltasar Moreno compiled "la gran mayoría de las cartas espirituales de Sor María Manuela" (ARMACANQUI 1999, 107). This means he selected and ordered the nun's spiritual letters so that their compilation and inclusion in Volume II furthered his argument that her life was exemplary of sainthood. In other words, the editing subject imposed his own agenda on the spiritual letters. We may imagine therefore a culling of the primary material so that the letters, when compiled, would follow this agenda closely. Now, the reconfiguration of what were originally separate letters into texts whose juxtaposition allows them to stand in relationship to one another testifies to the creation of a new physical manifestation of the work, making possible a different, consecutive reading.<sup>11</sup> For, as Phelps points out, a reader is subject to the subliminal effects of the forms she or he encounters (PHELPS 1994, 65). Our reading of María Manuela's spiritual letters in Volume II is therefore affected by both the conscious and unconscious choices of the editing subject in the creation of the compilation.

One of the most striking aspects of the consecutive reading of María Manuela's spiritual letters is the clear and steady development of her first-person character. In spite of the fact that the letters were written at different times and in response to different prompts (Loayza's written and/or oral answers), and may not appear in the order they were written, their

11. Peter L. Shillingsburg points out that such operations would have been greatly affected by the editor's imagination, perception and "the concrete", where fancy, judgement, criticism and understanding play major roles in the construction of the letters as text (SHILLINGSBURG 1996, 7).

protagonist transforms in a steady and linear fashion from abject sinner to saintly bride of Christ waiting to join her Savior in heaven. While this may have been her true, spiritual trajectory as it was laid out in her spiritual letters, it is the consistency with which she becomes a stronger, more committed bride of Christ in their compilation that is convincing. In other words, alongside the agency we saw developed through the rhetoric of the individual letters, in another circuit of power beneath the discourse of the compilation, the hagiographic model of character development is followed to the letter.

In the early compiled letters, María Manuela is characterized as a mystic and visionary who recounts the terrifying events of her spiritual life. Underlying all her experiences is the insecurity she feels regarding her contact with God: “Ya no puedo estar mi P<adr>e en esta vida. Estoi mui aflijida no puedo explicar todo lo que me [h]a pasado i conosido” (1v). She writes out of obedience to Loayza and continues her spiritual journey despite her anxiety and terror, entering into the *cuarta capilla* with all the angels, saints, and of course, the Virgin Mary (2v–2r). She repeatedly turns power over to Loayza in questions of orthodoxy regarding her visionary experience: “Y Ud. las [ylustraciones] entenderá q<ue> yo sólo digo que todo se me quedó en las capillas como Ud. sabe” (2r). While she receives *luces* directly from God, she is counting on Loayza to make sense of them: “[H]a resivido mucho el alma q<ue> Ud. sabe entender . . .” (2r).

María Manuela’s character here exhibits a humility that goes beyond the *tretas del débil* (LUDMER 1984, 47–48) and approaches the sacred. God has chosen her (*predilecta de Dios*), but she wishes only to humble herself before Him: “que sólo me [ha] [e]legido y deseo q<ue> me colme de mucha y profunda humildad, y todas las Virtudes que adorne mi pobre alma para que más y más la una a su M<aje>stad amén” (3v). She spiritualizes all her experiences, and suffers doubt, illness and fear of the devil in the name of God: “He tenido una representación de toda mi Vida en los padecimientos de amor y temor que me da su M<ajes>tad a entender . . . que [he] sido mártir por el amor y el temor” (3r). Her life imitates the life of Christ, making her a prime candidate for sainthood, and she is “esta pobre pecadora” (4r), who is “aflijida i temerosa, i repu[g]nante” (5r–5v) as she confesses her sins in writing. She even refers to herself as “esta per[r]a bie[ja], asquerosa, miserable” (6v).

From the seventh letter (9v) forward, the discourse becomes very confusing, however. Armacanqui notes that María Manuela’s handwriting deteriorates, and her letters are replete with incomplete sentences (ARMA-

CANQUI 1999, 25 n217). The nun complains of failing health, which could explain these phenomena, yet she continues to write about her doubts, fears, and infirmities. She accepts God's will in everything and has absolute faith that He can do anything: "I me ofresí i me netregó a que [h]isiera todo lo que quisera de mí" (11v). In fact, she believes God is making her into his handiwork a matter that should be publicized for the sake of other Christian souls: "Me dijo que me tenía mucho amor, que desde muchacha lo [h] abía querido con pensamientos, palabras i obras que lo tenía mui agradable i muy amante mío, i quería por mi Reso i mucha gloria i que pues se publicaran todas las misericordias que [h]a hecho con esta pecadora indi[g]na . . ." (11v–11r). At this time, the reader notes that the character María Manuela begins to move away from the poor, miserable, unworthy woman of the earlier letters to someone whom God has begun to mold into a perfect spouse: "Me aseguró en que el Biernes Santo a las tres de la tarde saldría desta vida i yebaría mi Alma a selebrar las bodas que así como lo [h] abía quitado tantas beses del poder de judíos para quien lo atorme[n]tara(s) el día me [h] abía de sacar de los peligros desta vida i yebarme a su gloria" (11r).

Like Christ, she is to die on Good Friday at three o'clock. She will be taken to heaven to live in God's glory, far from the troubles and temptations of life on earth. This revelation frightens María Manuela, and she worries she is an *ilusa* (11r). Nevertheless, she continues to write, seeking out Loayza's consolation. Her visionary experiences become longer and more frequent, as do her mystic unions. In each of these, she continues to receive *luces* from God, purifying her soul and preparing her for death and entry into heaven: "El biernes a las dies de la noche me ensendió la misericordia del Señor mi Alma i corasón en un bolcán de fuego. Los afetos i deseos fueron con mucha ilustración mui grandes" (19v). She is learning to view God as her future spouse: "De repente se me apareció Jesucrí[s]to como andaba en el mundo [y] echado en mi misma almada con amor me trajo . . . Al istante yegó su rost[r]o al mío . . ." (18v–18r).

In a subsequent vision, she sees herself inside her own soul as "una niña mui linda con una bestidura mui rica [y] blanca que mostraba puresa. Tube la intelijensia que era mi Alma que la llebaba la S<antí>s<i>ma Trinidad a que se desposara con Jesús Sacramentado, i la yebó su Magestad a la Cuarta Capiya" (19v). Pure of heart and soul, she is at her wedding with God, seated between Jesus and the Virgin Mary, as God the Father begins the ceremony. Wed to Jesus, loved by God the Father, Mary and all the angels and saints, María Manuela has come a long way from the hopeless sinner of the early letters. She is stronger of character, purer, more educated

in God's will, and yet, if the rhetoric of the letters holds true, more of an agent now than she was in the earlier letters. Nevertheless, she still refers to herself at the end of the ceremony as "indinísima pecadora" and casts her relationship with her Spouse as one of Master and slave, "esta su pobre esclaba" (19v).

In the final letters, María Manuela experiences a spiritual liberation unlike any recounted thus far. Mystic and erotic desire mix in a flight of her soul whereby "Las uniones con la Divinidad i Umanidad son continúa[s], especialmente por la mañana y a media noche" and God has opened ". . . todas las puertas de su misericordia(s), i así está mi espíritu bolando a todas partes sin impedimento" (20v). Now, messages from God are clearer, and while fear continues, intense mystic contact also continues, sweet yet painful. These letters (20r-25r) are difficult to understand. The writing is filled with anxiety and the language stutters under the weight of trying to recount María Manuela's development toward sainthood (21v). Ample repetition of the themes already developed occurs: the nun as poor and ignorant, the collaboration of all the angels and saints in her spiritual experiences, mystic union, visions, and the commonplace of her being in almost constant rapture (21v-23r).

Amid the whirlwind of mystic experience in the final letter, María Manuela undergoes an important and stunning change of character. From the downtrodden and vile soul who was willing to enter into marriage with God even if the only way was to be His slave, she emerges as a strong, confident woman. She accepts her salvation as fact, and now self-identifies not as God's slave but as His spouse: "Me llenó el espíritu [y]a de confianza y liberta de poder tomar el título de esposa" (24v). In the remainder of the letter, María Manuela revels in the constant mystic union with her Spouse, and credits her confessor with helping her arrive at this moment of spiritual maturity, for she has become a soul worthy of marriage to Christ. In accepting the will of God throughout her life, and ultimately her salvation, María Manuela developed into the perfect candidate for sainthood. She lived a life of *imitatio Christi*, served God, wrote, confessed and obeyed her confessor. Her life, in the eyes of the editing subject, merited publication (the compilation of the letters and their placement into the second volume of her work) because she is a perfect example of how to live the life of a good Early Modern Christian woman.

This paper has examined the spiritual letters of Sor María Manuela de Santana. Her use of rhetoric in these works speaks to her mastery of classical rhetoric in epistolary composition as well as her ability to use

successfully other rhetorical conventions, the language of the *Vida*, the hagiographic biography, the sermon, and the legal defense in order to tell her story. We have noted her strong agency, which she exercised by means of the written word. We have also seen that despite the unequal relationship of power between her and Father Loayza, and the conventions that obscured her expression of self, her letters became spaces where she could show herself obedient to the Church while she subverted Church authority and conducted a study of her identity.

We have also examined the material effects of the editing subject on our reading of María Manuela's spiritual letters. We traced the development of the character María Manuela as a product of the compilation of her separate spiritual letters into an edited volume. We cannot know exactly María Manuela's spiritual trajectory here on earth. We can say, however, that our reading of her spiritual letters and the development of her character in the compiled work shows her life as an example of *imitatio Christi* of sufficient importance so as to merit its own hagiographic biography and possibly a dossier for beatification. No evidence exists of any formal presentation of María Manuela's case to the Diocese, however. It is, nevertheless likely that, as Bilinkoff points out, María Manuela's exemplary life greatly advanced the standing of both her civic and religious communities (BILINKOFF 2003, xiv–xv). In other words, the Church was able to exploit her holiness for the purpose of educating the faithful in the Christian lifestyle of Early Modern Peru. I hope to have contributed in a concrete way to the debate about women's voices in Early Modern Spanish America, and how those voices reveal themselves despite the editing process.

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