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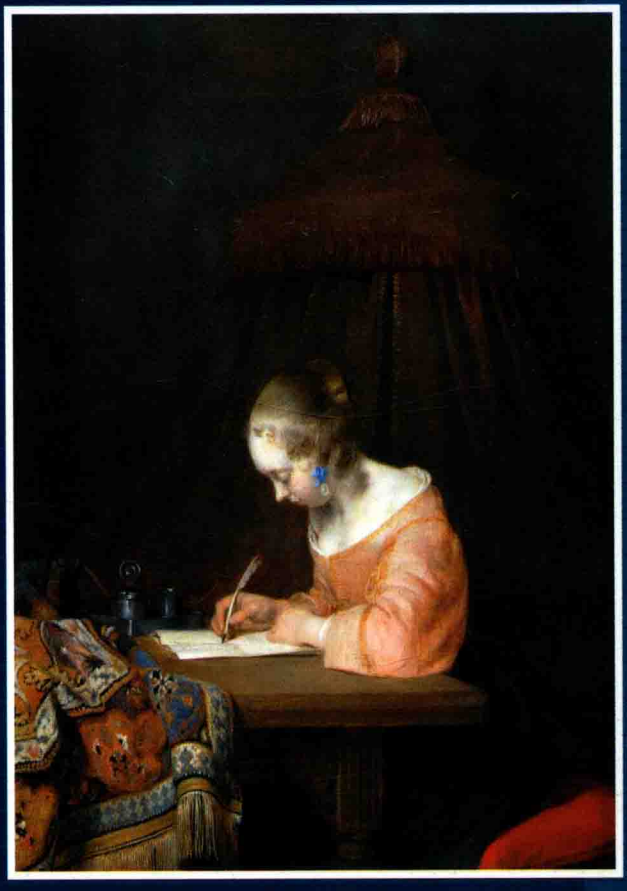

WOMEN AND GENDER IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

Autobiographical Writing by Early Modern Hispanic Women

ELIZABETH TERESA HOWE
Tufts University, USA

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING BY EARLY MODERN HISPANIC WOMEN

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List of Abbreviations

Journal Abbreviations

BRAE	Boletín de la Real Academia Española
BRAH	Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia
BHS	Bulletin of Hispanic Studies
CHA	Cuadernos Hispanoamericanas
Hisp	Hispania
HR	Hispanic Review
JHP	Journal of Hispanic Philology
MLN	(Formerly Modern Language Notes; now MLN)
MLQ	Modern Language Quarterly
NRFH	Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica
PMLA	(Formerly Publications of the Modern Language Association; now PMLA)
Ren	Renascence
RCEH	Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos
RILCE	Revista de Filología Hispánica
RF	Romanische Forschungen
RomN	Romance Notes

Other Abbreviations

CSIC	Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
UNED	Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Madrid)

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Telling Li(v)es: Women and Autobiography

"Spaniards don't write autobiographies."[1]

Introduction

Until very recently, students and scholars of Spanish letters quite often found a distressing lack of attention paid to their subject in those studies that purported to consider movements, genres, and contributions to European literature and culture. In similar fashion, works by women authors were also generally absent from studies devoted to the early modern period. In the case of autobiography, the omissions are striking, for virtually no examples of life-writing by women could be found in the earliest scholarly studies of the genre. When it was included, women's autobiographical writing—whether in Spain or elsewhere—was more often minimized or relegated to a separate subcategory, thus marginalizing their lives and works even further while ostensibly "including" them at the same time.[2]

In her occasionally humorous study on the subject of women's writing, Joanna Russ enumerates the many strategies employed over the centuries to suppress or even erase works by women from literary scholarship. Although she focuses primarily on British and American women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, her observations apply equally well to Hispanic women writing in the late medieval and early modern periods, roughly from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Near the end of her work, Russ summarizes a few of the rationales adduced as justifications for eliminating or simply ignoring women's writing altogether. These range from an absolute denial of authorship to a grudging recognition that some women did write, but they are few and of little interest to the general reader.[3]

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[1] Fernández (*Apology to Apostrophe* 1–2) cites this cliché, attributing the sentiment to a number of writers. See also Sibbald, "Salvaging the Self" 3. Herpoel (*A la zaga* 39–40) remarks on the "escasez de referencias a la Península" (scarcity of references to the [Iberian] peninsula) in the studies of autobiography in Europe.

[2] I will use "autobiography" with its adjectival forms and "life-writing" as synonymous in what follows. Distinctions between autobiography and other forms of life-writing, such as memoirs or journals, will be clarified in the text as needed.

[3] In *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (76), Russ offers a few of the reasons presented, such as: "she didn't write it. She wrote it, but she shouldn't have. She wrote it, but it's only interesting/included in the canon for one, limited reason. She wrote it, but there are very few of her."

Her work reflects the feminist dialogue that began in the last quarter of the twentieth century, one that sought to reassess the often limited view of the genre. Where boundaries of authorship or of the kinds of life-writing considered "real" autobiography had constrained the inclusion of those perceived as marginal to the endeavor, new approaches to the subject expanded or even razed the canonical walls that had implicitly or explicitly shut out the "other." Examination of "ego-documents"[4] of every kind led to a wide range of works and authors enjoying critical attention. Principal among them were women.

Prior to the appearance of feminist scholarship, therefore, much of the skepticism described by Russ applied equally well to the women writers included in the present study. Although Russ focused on writers of fiction, the objections she enumerates were magnified when the work in question was autobiographical in nature, for women's lives were all too readily dismissed as domestic, uneventful, and, therefore, unremarkable.[5] If those women lived in early modern Spain or its colonies, ignoring their lives was easier still, since, in some quarters, there were those who claimed—quite wrongly—that Spaniards—whether male or female—simply didn't write autobiographies. Jodi Bilinkoff suggested that a northern European, Protestant bias virtually eliminated Spain from any discussion of the Renaissance, whether in the realm of autobiography or, for that matter, religious literature in general ("Navigating the Waves" 162). Yet, as Peter Burke points out, "introspection and self-examination were not Protestant monopolies at this period, as the examples of Saints Teresa and Ignatius (among others) show" ("Representations" 27). More problematic for the present study is the opinion of Burton Pike and others that autobiography *per se* did not exist until the nineteenth century when the term first entered the English lexicon.[6] Still other critics contend that no one can truly write his or her own life, leading to the questionable

[4] According to Rudolf Dekker (*Egodocuments and History* 7), "in the early 1950s the historian Jacques Presser invented a new word: 'egodocument.' He proposed to use his neologism for diaries, memoirs, personal letters and other forms of autobiographical writing. [H]e defined ego-documents as 'those historical sources in which the user is confronted with an 'I', or occasionally … a 'he', continuously present in the term as the writing and describing subject'."

[5] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 114. See, also, Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves" 34; 40–41; and Gilmore, *Autobiographics* 46, for more on women's autobiographical writing.

[6] "Time in Autobiography" 332. Pomerleau ("The Emergence of Women's Autobiography" 21, adds another century, yet still contends that "autobiography before the seventeenth century is practically nonexistent." Since each seems to have "English" autobiographical writing in mind, the omissions (Augustine being the most obvious) may be understood. Yet, as at least one critic notes, just because the term does not appear until the nineteenth century doesn't mean the genre didn't. After all, diseases certainly existed well before they were officially named.

conclusion that autobiography as a genre—whether written by men or women—doesn't really exist.[7]

Denying women agency and, by extension, authorship of their written work served as a primary means of omitting them from the canon for many years. If women were deemed incapable of writing, then it followed that works attributed to them were actually written by another (read: male) hand (Russ, *How to Suppress* 20). In the realm of early modern peninsular literature, examples abound of female authors who suffered such indignities, from Luisa de Sigea, whose work was co-opted and turned into pornography by Nicholas Chorier, to Doña Oliva Sabuco de Nantes, whose own father insisted that he was the author of her two treatises.[8]

The example of Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, is equally a case in point. Although considered one of the first female autobiographers in England, her life narrative was also the victim of literary erasure.[9] Something similar occurred in fourteenth-century Spain with the *Memorias* of Doña Leonor López de Córdoba, whose authorship of her own memoirs was challenged. So, too, was the composition of the first of the two treatises written by the fifteenth-century nun, Sor Teresa de Cartagena. When the works in question are autobiographical in whole or in part, as are those by Cavendish, López de Córdoba, and Sor Teresa, then more than agency is at risk. Indeed, their very lives and their right to tell them are in peril of dismissal or even deletion.

In those instances in which the authorship of the life narrative by a woman author was recognized, male authorities of the time marshaled a different argument against it: to wit, "she wrote it but she shouldn't have" (Russ, *How to Suppress* 76). Part of that proscription derived from the Renaissance notion that women's speech—whether written or spoken—placed them in the public sphere where men might gaze upon them and threaten thereby their sexual purity (Jones, "Surprising Fame" 76). Precisely this kind of criticism was leveled against the *Vida/Life* of Santa Teresa de Jesús in the sixteenth century and most of the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in the seventeenth. When Russ considers the "pollution of agency" in chapter 2 of her study, she cites the example of Margaret Cavendish once again. In her case, the Duchess is "blamed for not having written her work herself, [and] is also judged mad for having written it" (25). Still others deny that her *True Relation* is autobiography because of its brevity, a criticism as easily used against López de Córdoba's *Memorias*.[10] In this regard, the works of Santa Teresa provide an apposite example. Although not deemed mad, Teresa as writer led one aggrieved theologian to propose eliminating all of her books "since there are many other

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[7] See Cameron, "The Theory and Practice" 224. See, also, Vance, "Augustine's *Confessions*" 2 and Mandel, "The Autobiographer's Art" 224, who consider the "impossibility" of writing one's life story.

[8] See Howe, *Education and Women* 54–6; 131–2, for more on these two authors.

[9] I will examine the example of Cavendish in greater depth in the next chapter.

[10] See Mason ("The Other Voice" 208–9). López de Córdoba's work will be considered in Chapter 2.

books from which one can safely and profitably learn of the spiritual path, without having a woman come along and teach, for women are not given this office, but should wait in silence, as the apostle Paul said."[11] Certainly, the most notable of the saint's writings was her *Vida/Life*, edited and only published after her death.

Although ordered by a series of confessors and spiritual directors to write of her mystical insights in prayer, Santa Teresa saw her first attempt consigned to the fire and subsequent drafts passed from hand to hand, subject to an extended review by various male authorities. Since it was common practice by Santa Teresa's time for a confessor to demand a so-called *vida por mandato* (command autobiography) from nuns under his care, life-writing such as hers has also been considered suspect since the real or perceived role of the confessor as editor calls into question how much of the account is actually hers. In other instances, the *vida por mandato* was dismissed as "confessional" rather than revelatory, a term used pejoratively when applied to women's writing. Yet, juxtaposing the confessions of Rousseau and Saint Augustine with those autobiographical accounts by women, Julia Penelope notes that "male accounts of intense autobiographical experience are not usually put down by being called 'confessional'."[12] It is fair to ask, then, why until the dawn of feminist criticism, women's autobiographical life narratives were too often ignored or dismissed as unimportant.

Autobiography: Definitions

In his seminal study of the history of autobiography in antiquity (seminal in every sense, since the author did not see fit to include virtually any women in the work), Georg Misch reduced the term to its essential parts: "the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*auto*)" (1.5). This etymology of the word supplies the essential points for understanding what the majority of critics consider autobiography to be. Although some also appear to exclude women's lives from the genre through omission as Misch does, the definition provided does not specify the sex of the "individual." Extrapolating from this simple definition, Philippe Lejeune attempted to articulate certain rules governing what he called the "autobiographical pact" (rules he later revised). For Lejeune, the fundamental elements of autobiographical writing were four: (1) the form employed; to wit, prose narrative; (2) the subject; the life story of an individual

[11] Cited in Weber, *Teresa of Avila* 161–2. Contemporary psychology is less shy in deeming Santa Teresa an hysteric, however. See Mazzoni (*Saint Hysteria* 37ff) for more on this point. Jones ("Surprising Fame" 79) notes that "the injunction to silence and invisibility was laid upon all women, married or not." She goes on to point out that "the ideal woman … was distinguished by what she did not do, or, equally important, by what men did not do to her: she was unseen, unheard, untouched, unknown—at the same time that she was obsessively observed."

[12] Paraphrased by Russ (29). Goetz ("The Problematics of Gender" 95) states that "the archetype of the introspective confession is clearly Augustine's *Confessions*.

personality; (3) the author; an actual person who is identical to the narrator; and, finally, (4) the position of the narrator as principal character of his account; that is, a subject who adopts a retrospective point of view within the narrative proper ("Autobiographical Pact" 4).[13] Elizabeth Bruss further refined these tendencies by adding other provisos, including independent public verification of the author's actual existence, acceptance of the truth-value of what the author reports, and sincerity of the autobiographer's belief in what s/he asserts (*Autobiographical Acts* 10–11).

The simple distinctions expounded by each of these critics are susceptible to refutation, as subsequent analysis shows. Hence, Misch's assertion that the "life story" of an individual personality is integral to autobiography suggests that it is possible to record such a story at all. Lejeune's prose narrative construct initially rejects other forms of life-writing, such as diaries, journals, memoirs, even poetry and the like, an omission he sought to rectify in his revised article. It also excludes oral versions recorded by an amanuensis or, more recently, an audio/video recording.[14] A "retrospective point of view" casts the exercise in an ever-evolving present that attempts to find coherence in the past events chosen for inclusion in the work. Lastly, Bruss's criteria for "truth value" and the writer's belief in what s/he asserts ignores the possibility that the autobiographer may not be telling the unmediated truth in every instance or, simply, that by viewing one's past through a personal prism, the story necessarily lacks objectivity and, therefore, "truthfulness."[15]

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[13] Lejeune ("Autobiographical Pact *bis*" 123), later revised his initial restrictive definition in order to allow for "any text in which the author *seems* to express his life or his feelings." Bruner and Weisser ("The Invention of Self" 129) point out that autobiography is "bound by strong conventions regarding not only *what* we say when we tell about ourselves, but *how* we say it, to whom, and so on [sic]."

[14] See Brockmeier ("From the End" 264) who explains that "the genre of autobiography is no longer exclusively associated with *written* texts (in the traditional sense of the word) by authors of literature, memoirs, and historical and otherwise documentary life accounts. Instead, autobiography is viewed as also embracing many forms of oral discourse, including fragmentary and occasional remarks."

[15] Pozuelo Yvancos (*De la autobiografía* 17) observes: "son las de la autobiografía y la ficción relaciones difíciles como lo son todas las fronterizas, puesto que la autobiografía ha sido defendida—de ahí su lugar de frontera—como género no ficcional por algunos autores, en tanto que para otros es uno de los lugares en que se dirime la necesaria e intrínseca ficcionalización de toda escritura narrativa" [autobiography and fiction are difficult relations as are all those on the frontier, since autobiography has been defended—hence its place on the frontier—as a non-fictional genre by some authors, while for others it is one of the places in which one separates oneself from the necessary and intrinsic fictionalization of all written narrative] (my translation). The author goes on to challenge the resistance of Lejeune and Bruss to acknowledging any novelistic techniques in the writing of autobiography (24).

The very notion of telling one's own life creates almost insoluble problems for both the writer and the reader. Not least of these is the inability of anyone to encapsulate an entire life in any form. On the one hand, such a narrative would, perforce, require a lifespan to tell and, on the other, the author would have to be alive to do so and, therefore, incapable of bringing the story to its conclusion.[16] Consequently, the autobiographer must, of necessity, select from the events of his or her past life and attempt to impose upon them a coherent narrative that may or (more likely) may not have been present in the actual living, what Roy Pascal calls "a shaping of the past" (*Design and Truth* 9). When Georges Gusdorf calls attention to the disconnect between the avowed plan of the autobiography to account for the history of the author's life and its "deepest intentions, which are directed toward a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being" ("Conditions and Limits" 39), he touches on the slipperiness of "truth telling" which Bruss and, to a certain extent, Lejeune claim as essential to the enterprise. More recently, José María Pozuelo Yvancos reverses this approach, pointing out that autobiography is, of necessity, two-faced. The autobiographer both "constructs" an identity, much as a novelist might, and strives to communicate and justify him/herself to readers and listeners alike. Rather than antithetical endeavors, Pozuelo Yvancos sees them as inextricably linked in the very genre itself (*De la autobiografía* 52).[17]

Is it possible to constrain autobiography within a recognized literary genre? Is it a history of self or a metaphor of the self?[18] Is it a symbolic action or, as Paul de Man would have it, "not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts"?[19] In de Man's best-known characterization, autobiography is an act of disfigurement, an act whose central problem in attempting to figure the self requires the author to stand outside that very self and "de-face" or "dis-figure" it in order to reveal the underlying reality not visible to others.[20] As a result, one must either accept the truthfulness

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[16] Pope ("Theories and Models" 213) states clearly that "autobiography is not, of course, a life, not even the telling of a life. It is a text that conveys an effort to understand and evaluate the self and its history." By the same token, de Man ("Autobiography as De-facement" 922) claims that autobiography "demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitution."

[17] Bruner and Weisser ("The Invention of Self" 132) observe that "the act of self-reporting, as every thoughtful autobiographer since Saint Augustine has remarked, separates the self who is *telling* from the past self or 'selves' who are being *told about* [sic]."

[18] Kazin ("Autobiography as Narrative" 213) considers it a history of self. Olney entitled his study of the subject *Metaphors of Self.*

[19] De Man, "Autobiography as De-facement" 921. Kenneth Burke considers it a "symbolic action" as cited in Jay, "What's the Use?" 48.

[20] Eakin ("The Economy of Narrative Identity" 232) argues that "life writing in its various forms presents us with the subject's self as product, as text, whereas … [he] considers self as process." He goes on to describe "one of these selves, the extended self, the self moving through time, [as] the primary subject of autobiographical discourse."

of that "underlying reality" or question the very ability to reveal it. To do so is necessarily to objectify what is most subjective about the individual person—a sense of oneself.

The difficulty of identifying the genre of autobiography (if one is so inclined) thus derives from a variety of problems inherent in the attempt to "tell one's own life." First among them is narrative time itself. The normal perspective of the autobiographer is that of a spectator caught in the present while regarding the past and the evolution of the individual's existence within that past. In the process, the past life either grows as time passes or the writer chooses an end point to which the narrative moves. Too often, the process also results in the imposition of coherence on the events of one's past life in order to explain the present reality. Such an exercise is fraught with difficulties, not least among them the loss of a sense of "the uncertainty and arbitrariness of life … and the plurality of options, realized and not, which is so characteristic of human agency" (Brockmeier, "From the End" 253), or, as Riggan would have it: "virtually everything which the narrator relates has value not only as information about his past but also as a characterization of the present individual" (*Pícaros, Madmen* 24).[21] Obviously, selecting events from one's past is also done in order to drive the narrative or to hold the reader's attention. Yet, by imposing such order on the events of one's life the writer moves the work from a strictly historical account to a kind of fiction in which the author transforms herself into a character of her own version of her life. In fact, the root of "fiction" is the Latin "*fingere*," to invent or to form, the exercise in which the autobiographer engages as s/he casts a retrospective glance upon the events of the past.[22]

However much the present interferes with the narration of a past life, the autobiographer is still writing a mediated experience of "self" consciousness. The result is an "account, given by a narrator in the here and now, about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then" (Brockmeier, "From the End" 250), what Jacques Derrida identifies as the "non-present trace" constantly informing the apparent presence of the narrative at hand.[23] Still, what the individual experienced or felt in the past may or may not correspond with the present moment of revisiting and retelling those events. Memory is inevitably corrupted by the passage of time and the intervening experiences that lead to the

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[21] Elbaz (*The Changing Nature* 12) directly challenges Renza on this point. Mazlish ("Autobiography and Psycho-analysis" 28) and Brockmeier ("From the End" 270–71) also address the problem. Pozuelo Yvancos (*De la autobiografía* 30) reminds his readers that it is a discourse with a social origin and consequences, composed in a particular time and place and with specific ends in mind that also set it apart from fiction.

[22] Bruner and Weisser ("The Invention of Self" 136) argue that "the act of autobiography … is what constructs the account of a life. Autobiography, in a word, turns life into text, however implicit or explicit the text may be. It is only by textualization that one can 'know' one's life. The process of life textualization is a complex one, a never-ending interpretation and reinterpretation."

[23] Cited in Sampson, "The Deconstruction" 11; 13.