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**Vela y Cueto, Maria. Autobiography and Letters of a Spanish Nun. Ed. Susan Diane Laningham and trans. Jane Tar.**

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**Vela y Cueto, Maria.**

***Autobiography and Letters of a Spanish Nun.* Ed. Susan Diane Laningham and trans. Jane Tar.**

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 51 / Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 504. Toronto: Iter Academic Press / Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016. Pp. xiii, 192. ISBN 978-0-86698-559-8 (paperback) \$33.95.

*Autobiography and Letters of a Spanish Nun*, the newly translated volume by Jane Tar, fits well within the recent growing body of scholarship on women's epistolary practices and their roles in religious life of the early modern period. Susan Laningham's insightful contribution to the edited volume, which goes above and beyond a mere introduction, successfully places Maria Vela y Cueto in historical and historiographical context. This volume is a great addition to the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series.

Maria Vela y Cueto came from an aristocratic family living in Avila, Spain. When Vela was nine years old, her father passed away. Her mother's favouring of mystical devotions and celibacy contributed to Vela's embracing of a monastic life at the age of fourteen. She joined the convent of Santa Anna, which was one of the most prestigious convents associated with the elites of Spain. She began writing her *Vida* (life) about ten years before her death in 1617, in order to record a chronological account of her spiritual journey. Writing her autobiography gave her the chance to reveal her "extraordinary relationship with God and the divine locutions and visions that inspired and directed her every move." Although a devout Catholic and deeply religious woman, Vela was quite a controversial figure in Counter-Reformation Spain. Many of her contemporaries were skeptical about her claim of divine favour in hearing voices and receiving visions, and about her maladies. Many found her heretical and a fraud, while others were more sympathetic. In her *Vida*, one can witness her desire to be recognized as a woman favoured by God for sainthood. Her autobiography was written for a specific purpose; thus, one learns nothing of the cares and concerns in the "normal" daily life of early modern women. However, the *Vida* does point out the challenges and obstacles women faced in gaining autonomy over their fates. Through daily religious rituals and her writing of the *Vida*, Vela used the only means available to empower herself in a male-dominated and religiously restrictive society: claiming a direct relationship with God.

While the *Vida* shows Vela's constant struggle in negotiating her place as a mystic, ascetic, and future saint, her personal correspondence to her brothers is filled with personal grievances and complaints about her superiors and fellow nuns. The personal letters provide a fascinating window into the relationship of Vela with other nuns, the convent's monastic procedures and politics, her ambitions to reform herself and the convent, and the degree of autonomy a cloistered ascetic life allowed. Moreover, these letters open a window into the relationships of the nuns to their aristocratic families; notably, their financial and emotional dependency.

Laningham's introduction shows the significance of the *Vida* to the historiography of early modern cloistered women and mysticism. Chapter 1 ("The Other Voice") explains why the *Vida* belongs to the series, claiming that it gives the reader a unique personal perspective on the life of an aristocratic nun in Counter-Reformation Spain. In chapter 2, "Life and Career," Laningham shows how Vela's upbringing in an aristocratic family in post-Reformation Avila shaped her ideas of spirituality and mysticism and enabled her to carve a space for herself in a prestigious and aristocratic convent. Chapter 3, "Religion in Counter-Reformation Spain," which is the most important chapter of the introduction, consists of five subcategories: Religious Uniformity, the Counter-Reformation Convent, Asceticism, Mysticism, and Women and the Devil. This chapter gives an overview of the effects of the Counter-Reformation in Spain, of how asceticism and mysticism were still a big part of the Catholic religion, and why women faced more challenges in reaching the highest level of spirituality. Laningham shows that despite the fact that an ascetic and mystic life was still held as the highest of honours in a Catholic's life, Vela's claim to have visions and hear the voice of God was met with skepticism. Laningham attributes this attitude to the perception of women as feeble and weak; she claims that the notion of women being easily betrayed and possessed by the devil was still prevalent in the early modern period. In the final chapter, "Maria Vela y Cueto Her Legacy," Laningham explores the impact of Vela's *Vida*. She cautions the readers that although Vela has contributed to a popular genre of female discourse in early modern Spain, a surge in female authored *vidas* is not evidence of female self-determination and empowerment. In fact, these *vidas* were ordered, monitored, and censored by men who were supposedly "the guardians of orthodoxy."

Nevertheless, this edition gives the English readers a clear glimpse of the life of a fascinating woman in her own words. The edited volume is an excellent addition to scholarship on the history of early modern monastic women. This edition will be of great interest to scholars of religion, gender, and the body in Post-Tridentine Catholic culture.

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**Wickham, Chris.**

***Medieval Europe.***

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. xv, 335 + 32 ill., 7 maps. ISBN 978-0-300-29734-4 (hardcover) US\$35.

Scholarly interpretations of the European Middle Ages often tend towards grand narratives that search for distinct breaking points—becoming preoccupied with periodization—or for the origins of nations and national identities. Chris Wickham, Chichele Professor of Medieval History at Oxford, here offers a broad, large-scale interpretation of medieval Europe that eschews both the search for origins and the impulse to demarcate chronological boundaries. Instead, he has written an account that ultimately argues for both structural continuity and change leading up to the highly politically-engaged nature of the late Middle Ages. This widespread engagement is what marks the end of the period, not “crisis, or anxiety, or the Renaissance, or a sense that the continent was, somehow, waiting for the Reformation and European global conquest” (257).

Wickham’s previous work has primarily concentrated on medieval Italy up to the end of the thirteenth century. His broader syntheses of European medieval history have also been influential; his *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005) won a number of prestigious awards, including the Wolfson History Prize, the Deutscher Memorial Prize, and the AHA’s James Henry Breasted Prize. *Medieval Europe* is an extension of this synthesizing scholarship into the high and late Middle Ages. At the broadest level, Wickham aims to account for the changes taking place in the roughly thousand-year span that saw the transition from the dominance of the Roman empire to the recognizable