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Journal

Mester, 20(2)

Author

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Publication Date

1991

DOI

10.5070/M3202014144

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Leonor López de Córdoba and the Poetics of Women's Autobiography¹

Leonor López de Córdoba recorded her life story in the early part of the fifteenth century.² Her project was remarkable both for its genre and her gender: the *Memorias* is Castile's first autobiography;³ Leonor López de Córdoba is Castile's first woman writer.

Yet, while those who study the text call Leonor a woman writer, they always add that this designation is "stretching a point" (Deyermond 29). For in fact, the *Memorias* has been taken to be a text heavily reworked and re-written by a man. The dominant view is that Leonor dictated her autobiography to a male notary who tried his best to make her illogical and fragmentary self-representation sound orderly and effective.

The notion that Leonor is not the true author of the *Memorias* is based on one principal argument. It is said that the four lines of legal-type phraseology with which the *Memorias* opens demonstrates a notary's hand in the composition of the text.⁴ That the work then quickly shifts from legal language to topics and styles associated with female authorship (e.g. mystical visions, communings with saints, and the "feminine" discourse of self-effacement) is said to result from the male notary's ultimate exhaustion in the face of Leonor's verbal outpouring.⁵

I will argue here that this interpretation is less plausible than the view that Leonor was the true author of the entire text, thus making her, as I suggested at the start, a *bona fide* female autobiographer, Spain's first woman writer, and an author on a par with well-known early female autobiographers in England, France, Italy, Sweden, and colonial America.

1. Background

Leonor was a noblewoman from the south of Spain born around 1362/3. She witnessed some of the most astonishing and horrific events in Castilian history: the violent overthrow of a legitimate ruler by his bastard brother,

the Black Death, the first organized and publicly-sanctioned destruction of Jewish lives and property in Spain. She herself made history as chief advisor and confidante to Queen Catalina of Lancaster, who was co-regent with her brother-in-law, Fernando de Antequera, for the *infante*, Juan II.

Because of Leonor's prominence in the Court and her own autobiographical text, we have more information about her than about most other medieval Castilian women. We know from her description in Fernán Pérez de Guzmán's *Generaciones y semblanzas* that she was a powerful figure in fifteenth-century Castilian politics—although Pérez de Guzmán makes it clear he didn't like her, calling her "frivolous and wretched" (*liviana y pobre*) (34). We also know of her position of authority from the *Chronicle of King Juan II*, which comments that Queen Catalina "trusted [Leonor] so much, and loved her in such a manner, that nothing was ever done without her counsel" (287). Letters exchanged between Leonor and Queen Catalina further confirm the extent of Leonor's political clout—so extraordinary that a modern historian has been led to remark that Leonor was the "real arbiter of Castile's internal policies for some time" (Estow 36).⁶

Leonor's own life story tells us that she was a member of a family whose fortunes largely equalled those of the king they supported. This king was Pedro I of Castile, who died at the hands of his illegitimate half-brother, Enrique, in 1369. As a young girl, Leonor lived under siege in the fortified town of Carmona, near Seville. In 1371, her family surrendered to Enrique, who had become King of Castile upon his brother's death. In spite of his promises to protect Leonor's family, Enrique immediately executed Leonor's father. He then imprisoned Leonor and her husband—to whom she had been married at the age of seven—as well as other members of her family. Leonor describes in her *Memorias* the horrors of prison life, in particular, the deaths of her thirteen year old brother and all the other members of her household, save her husband.

Leonor writes in her *Memorias* that she was admitted to the *Orden de Guadalupe* after her release from prison. I believe that this "Orden" was the Order of Santa Clara, whose famous convent in Guadalupe was intimately connected with Leonor's family.⁷ It would, of course, be helpful to establish the relationship of Leonor to the *Clarisas* for, in supporting the view that Leonor was capable of composing the work herself, it is important to show that she was an educated woman. Since we know that monasteries and convents were centers not only of piety, but of erudition and learning in the Middle Ages (Lucas 137–56), we can suppose that with the *Clarisas*, Leonor might have received some formal instruction.

We know from historical records that Leonor was the mother of at least three sons and one daughter (Márquez de Castro 204–5). We know from her *Memorias* that one of these sons died tragically of the plague after tend-

ing an infected adoptive son—a Jewish boy orphaned, presumably, in the notorious Córdoba pogrom of 1392.

2. Official language and imagery in the *Memorias*

I would now like to begin looking closely at the argument in support of the claim that Leonor's text was actually composed by a male notary. Whether Leonor's text was *written down* by a notary is, of course, not the issue here, for this was a common practice among male writers in medieval Castile. What *is* at issue is the claim that in the case of Leonor's *Memorias*, the notary went beyond transcription and actually modified, refined, and reworked Leonor's own narrative.

The *Memorias*'s initial phrases—

En el nombre de dios Padre, y del hijo, y del Espiritu Santo tres Personas, y un solo Dios verdadero en trinidad, al qual sea dada gloria á el Padre, y al hijo, y al Espiritu Santo, asi como era en el comienzo, asi es agora, y por el Siglo delos Siglos amen. En el nombre del qual Sobredicho Señor y dela Virgen Santa Maria su Madre, y Señora y Abogada delos Pecadores, y á honrra, y ensalsamiento de todos los Angeles, é Santos y Santas dela Corte del Cielo amen.

Por ende, Sepan quantos esta Escripura vieren, como yo Doña Leonor Lopez de Cordoba, fija de mi Señor el Maestre Don Martin Lopez de Cordoba, e de Doña Sancha Carrillo, á quien dé Dios gloria y Parayso. Juro por esta significancia de + en que Yo adoro, como todo esto que aquí es escrito, es verdad que yo lo vi, y pasó por mi, y escribolo á honrra, y alabanza de mi Señor Jesu Christo, é dela Virgen Santa Maria su Madre que lo parió . . . (16)

—are in fact, saturated with wording found commonly in fifteenth-century Spanish legal documents. This is the basis of the claim that a notary reworked, rather than just recorded, the text. Yet, on examination, the lines thus attributed to a notary are, taken together, quite unlike the work of a professional notary. In a survey of about two hundred fifteenth-century Spanish legal documents, I did not find anything like the density of formulaic expressions that the *Memorias* contains. Comparing the *Memorias*'s opening lines with these documents makes the initial phrases of the *Memorias* look like a caricature of the notarial style—or, at best, like the work of an amateur. A sampling of opening lines from actual fifteenth-century notarial documents—e.g.,

Sepan quantos esta carta vieren commo yo fulano fijo de fulano;

. . . In Dey nomine amen. Sepan quantos esta carta de testamento vieron, commo yo fulano, fijo de fulano, vecino de tal lugar, estando en

mi seso e en mi entendimiento . . . e temiendo me dela muerte natural de la qual alguno nin algunos non pueden fuyr nin escapar, otorgo e conosco que fago e ordeno este mi testamento aseruicio de Dios Padre e dela gloriosa Virgen Santa Maria su madre, con toda la corte del cielo . . . ;

Sean quantos esta carta vieren, commo nos, fulano e fulano, otorgamos e conosco por esta carta de nuestra propia e libre voluntad, que juramos a Dios e a Santa Maria e a esta sennal de crus + enque corporalment ponemos nuestras manos derechas . . . ⁸

—makes it clear that Leonor's amalgam of formulae goes well beyond what was both customary and appropriate in the formulistic diction of fifteenth-century papers.⁹

Thus a more plausible explanation of the "notarial"-style in the *Memorias's* opening lines is that Leonor, herself, tried to imitate official language. In any case, a resemblance between the initial phrases of Leonor's text and fifteenth-century Spanish legal documents could not alone establish male notarial intervention. Medievalists often find filiations between literary or epistolary writing and dictaminal or notarial models,¹⁰ for writers came into direct contact with such models in their personal legal dealings and letter writing and may have copied model letters or documents when composing their own works. They also may simply have used, or been influenced by, commonly accepted notions of format and style. What's more, Leonor's opening phrases are not only suggestive of the language of law, but also manifest common *topoi* of fifteenth-century male literary and historical writing. For example, the guarantee Leonor makes in the first four lines that the experiences and events recounted in the text are factual is very much like that made by her male contemporary, Pero López de Ayala, in his Prologue to the *Crónica del rey don Pedro*.

There are additional reasons to doubt that Leonor's use of legal phraseology provides evidence that a male notary intervened in her text. For one, the amassing of formulae which characterizes the beginning, but not the remainder,¹¹ of Leonor's work is a well-known strategy of form, one which is often seen in the literature of the period. Typical of the medieval Spanish oral tradition (*romancero*), for example, are opening formulae which serve as a crucial source of information for a text's public, establishing the text's identity, its themes, and its message.¹² A consciousness of such oral strategies in the written texts of the fifteenth century is evident in many of the works of Leonor's male contemporaries.¹³ For another, given the fact that the *Memorias* is an autobiography, the legal phraseology its author has recourse to should not, in and of itself, make for convincing evidence of a notary's hand. Recent theories of autobiographical writing have made plain the legalistic nature of the genre, using a plethora of terms drawn from the principles of law to discuss self-

representational writing: Philippe Lejeune, for example, describes the autobiographer as entering into a “contract” and as “manifest[ing] an intention to ‘honour the signature’ ”; he terms the matter of the type of contract existing between the author and the reader “*de jure*,” and so on (202–3). And it is not unthinkable that the autobiographer herself would have looked to the language of law—what Michel Foucault calls the “juridico-discursive” representation of power—¹⁴ to insist on the authority of her text and to establish its validity.

Indeed, it is precisely in her overstatement of official, legal formulae that Leonor, as a woman autobiographer, may have sought to validate her intervention in the larger, public arena of men’s writing. As a woman writer she was, after all, a transgressor in the universe of male discourse. By incorporating the range of linguistic codes suggestive of officialdom in the initial lines of her text, she may have attempted to locate herself and her *Memorias* within the parameters of writing developed and privileged by (male) political, ecclesiastical, and literary authorities. Moreover, by relying on legal discourse early on in the text, she deemphasizes the role of her subjective, female self and draws attention instead to the “objective” truths contained in her work.

In this manner, I believe, Leonor attempted to secure the legitimacy of her (female) claim to authority. Hence the legal formulae may be seen as part of a coherent strategy designed to ensure her work’s place in the public domain and in history. Indeed, the juridico-discursive authority which empowered her to tell her story also endowed her text with the seeds of longevity: the *Memorias* is in fact framed as a public record destined for wide and long-lived dissemination. This much is evident from the way in which the *Memorias* anticipates its textual community, assimilating in its locutions the two medieval traditions of audienceship—i.e. readers and listeners.¹⁵ Leonor expressly says that she writes both for those who are nonliterate and for those who are able to read.

This, then, was one facet of Leonor’s access, as a woman writer, to medieval Castilian culture and literary discourse.

3. Writing as a woman

Those who argue that Leonor’s work was actually composed by a male notary have had to explain the fact that the text quickly shifts from the language of law (i.e. official, notarial phrases that conventionally open legal documents) to topics and styles associated with female authorship (e.g. mystical visions, communings with saints, and the “feminine” discourse of self-effacement). They do so by arguing that the notary was overwhelmed by Leonor’s verbal outpouring. This somewhat tortuous argument becomes unnecessary if we dispose of the view that the text was partly

authored by a notary. The mixture of official, legal language and “feminine” discourse no longer needs to be explained by the hypothesis of two authors, and can instead be explained by the hypothesis of a single, female author appealing to two domains. These are the public, masculine arena, suffused with legal discourse, and the private, feminine arena, characterized by self-effacement. Indeed, this mixed discourse, deriving from a female author's attempt to situate her writings in the public domain, is characteristic of other early women's autobiographies such as her English near-contemporaries, Margery Kempe (b. ca. 1373) and Julian of Norwich (b. 1343)—as well as, in America, the *Reply to Sor Philotea* of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695). These, too, bear the peculiar hallmarks of two distinct universes of discourse—the public, male, legal discourse, and the private, female discursive spaces of the self-effacing woman. Leonor, like these other early women autobiographers, must have sought, in the mixing of male, official language with feminine discourse, a strategy which would authorize her public, female voice in a culture which had made silence a feminine convention.

That Leonor was conscious of herself as a woman writing seems plain from the materials she chose to include in her text. The *Memorias* largely depicts a world of men's absence.¹⁶ Although Leonor is careful to establish herself at the start of the work as her father's daughter and her husband's wife, she thereafter dwells on the deaths of the men closest to her—her father, her young brother, her son—and the absence of her husband during his seven years of wandering in search of the fortune he lost as a result of his imprisonment. Her description of life on her own is structured around women's spaces: a convent founded by her maternal grandparents and resided in by her mother; the household of a wealthy aunt. And while Leonor reports in the *Memorias* that her husband eventually did return home—after hearing of her material triumph—he is never, after this report, mentioned again.

A comparison between Leonor's work and that of other early women autobiographers also suggests that she was conscious of herself as a female author. For one, she goes to great lengths in her work to establish her authorial prerogative. Leonor, like Margery Kempe in England,¹⁷ carefully situates herself amongst other powerful women, tracing her story through a series of powerful foremothers.

The particular “powerful [female] life script” (Smith 55) Leonor chooses as a pretext for her work belongs to the Virgin Mary. Like Leonor, the Virgin is a mother. Also like Leonor, the Virgin is, in Leonor's characterization, a legal advisor—she calls her, “Lawyer of the Sinners” (*Abogada delos Pecadores* [16]). This gives Leonor—a woman whose counsel was indispensable to decision-making in the Castilian court—a double filiation with the Holy Mother—a woman whose life story had already been sanctified by male officials.

Significantly, Leonor grounds herself in other celestially-empowered foremothers, as well. She writes her text specifically in the name of *female*, in addition to male, saints: *santos y santas* (16). And once again she uses a legal term to characterize those honored in her work, noting that the male and female saints in whose name she writes inhabit the *court* of heaven—*Santos y Santas dela Corte del Cielo* (16). Thus women, in the *Memorias*, are firmly established as *bona fide* members, along with men, of both heavenly and legal precincts.

In spite of her use of hagiographical and devotional models in the *Memorias*, Leonor is, of course, not a saint, and her *Memorias* is not a spiritual autobiography. Yet by implicating her text in the discourse of hagiography, she is able to further her own struggle for interpretive authority within the public sphere. Hagiographical discourse, which had already successfully immortalized other women, might also immortalize her.

The influence of at least two important elements found in women's spiritual autobiography is plain in Leonor's text. These are, first of all, the establishment of celestial authorization for the life stories told in the works, and secondly, the autobiographer's self-representation as an "ideal" woman, obedient and self-effacing in spite of her bold speech. These elements are made manifest in the life story of Margery Kempe who, for example, insisted that it was God who commanded her to tell her story and that she thus made no departure, outspoken as she was, from the accepted feminine discourse of obeisance. They are present in the life story of St. Birgitta of Sweden (ca. 1303), who also declared that she was commanded by God to tell her story. And although Birgitta abandoned her children in order to travel and to speak publicly, she entered the public arena with specific and repeated reassurances from the Virgin Mary that her work was more important. They are seen in the writing of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who also reassured readers that she was an ordinary woman, for her public "reasonings" were legitimized by the feminine figure of the Virgin who gave birth to the Word and was therefore the matrix of Christian reason (Franco xv). And they are evident in the life story of Julian of Norwich, whose *Revelations* has recently been seen to make patent the unusual learning of its author, but who relied to such an extent on the "ideal" feminine discourse of self-denigration that until recently she, like Leonor, was assumed to have had male notarial intervention in her text.¹⁸

Leonor's projection in the *Memorias* into the "female" universe of hagiographical discourse as well as into the public, male discourse of letters and learning is what testifies to the text's roots in a woman-centered and woman-identified epistemology (Donovan 99). While she may indeed have authentically felt a special relationship with God, the Virgin, and the saints—she was, after all, the survivor of a horrible imprisonment which killed most of the members of her family—she needed primarily a strategy

to authorize the telling of her life story, otherwise a “nonstory” (Smith 50) in terms of medieval Castilian letters.

4. Conclusion

While Leonor's *Memorias* shares many features with the early autobiographies of women written during the medieval period in Europe and in colonial New Spain, it is in one respect quite different. Leonor was not, like Angela of Foligno (1248?–1309), St. Birgitta of Sweden, or María de San Joseph (1656–1736), a female religious. Her text tells chiefly of material, not spiritual, achievement—the prestige of her lineage, the contents of her dowry, her attainment of such worldly possessions as a home of her own. She does write of answered prayers to the Virgin and of miracles—it is, for example, the Virgin's miraculous intervention which leads to her acquisition of the much-coveted private house—but the thrust of her story is always her personal and material situation. Leonor is clearly no mystic. Her intimacy with the Virgin and her visions lead neither to prophecy nor to pilgrimage. She does not seek to eschew sexual intimacy with her husband in favor of chastity, like Margery Kempe; nor, like Julian of Norwich, does she enter the reclusive spaces of a convent cell. And Leonor's life story is not, like the women autobiographers of seventeenth-century New Spain, a confession dictated to, or elicited by, a priest.¹⁹

But precisely because Leonor is a secular woman autobiographer, her life story is of great significance to the genre. For the *Memorias* gives important testimony to women's quest for autobiographical authority even within the framework of their secular and private identities as wives, mothers, and daughters. Indeed, Leonor's choice of the autobiographical mode may have been a consequence of her struggle, as a secular woman, for interpretive power.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor Alan Deyermond, who, while differing with my conclusions, offered many invaluable comments on my ideas. An early version of this paper was read at the 1991 UCLA conference, *Female Discourses: Past, Present, and Future*.

2. The precise date of the text is unknown and critics disagree even as to whether it was written in the first or second decade of the fifteenth century. For important discussions of the *Memorias* and of Leonor, see Reinaldo Ayerbe-Chaux, “Las memorias de Doña Leonor López de Córdoba,” *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 2.2 (1977):11–33, and “Leonor López

de Córdoba y sus ficciones históricas" (typescript kindly made available to me by the author); Kathleen Amanda Curry, "Las 'Memorias' de Leonor López de Córdoba," Ph.D. Diss. Georgetown U, 1988; Alan Deyermond, "Spain's First Women Writers," *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols*, ed. Beth Miller (Berkeley: U of California, 1983), pp. 27-52; Deborah Sue Ellis, "The Image of the Home in Early English and Spanish Literature," Ph.D. Diss. Berkeley, 1982; Clara Estow, "Leonor López de Córdoba: Portrait of a Medieval Courtier," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 5 (1982): 23-46; Arturo Roberto Firpo, "Un ejemplo de autobiografía medieval: Las 'Memorias de Leonor López de Córdoba,'" *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 23:1(44) (1980): 19-32; Ruth Lubenow Ghassemi, "La 'crueldad' de los vencidos: Un estudio interpretativo de *Las Memorias de doña Leonor López de Córdoba*," *La Corónica* 18.1 (1989): 19-32; Amy Katz Kaminsky and Elaine Dorrough Johnson, "To Restore Honor and Fortune: 'The Autobiography of Leonor López de Córdoba,'" *The Female Autograph*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1984), pp. 12-13; and Carmen Marimón Llorca, *Prosisistas Castellanas Medievales* (Alicante: Publicaciones de la Caja de Ahorros Provincial, 1990). All quotes in this study are from Ayerbe-Chaux's "Las memorias"; translations are mine.

3. It is noteworthy that the first efforts at autobiography in Castile should have been carried out by a woman. Indeed, the coincidence of women's autobiographical writing with the earliest manifestations of the genre all over Europe and in the New World has been noted in a number of recent critical studies. Sidonie Smith, for example, comments on the yield of early examples of Continental, English, and American autobiography in the life stories of St. Teresa of Avila, Madame Guyon, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet. She remarks that "the very fact that women began writing autobiographies contemporary with the genre's emergence . . . is startling, disconcerting, and infinitely interesting" (42). Domna C. Stanton suggests that autobiography in fact may have originated with women (Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in *The Female Autograph*, ed. Domna C. Stanton [New York: New York Literary Forum, 1984], pp. 8-9). Clarissa W. Atkinson relates early examples of autobiography to the "new creation of the late Middle Ages": women saints who traveled widely and spoke out publicly (Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* [Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1983], p. 194). And Jean Franco discusses the early autobiographies of the New World—life stories of women mystics in New Spain (Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* [New York: Columbia U P, 1989]).

4. Deyermond was the first to suggest notarial intervention.

5. Deyermond writes:

I have a clear vision of the unfortunate notary, trying desperately to keep everything on a proper level of legal phraseology, being overwhelmed by Leonor López' flood of words, and realizing with a sigh that he had better reconcile himself to writing the story just as she told it (31).

6. See also Juan Torres Fontes, "La regencia de don Fernando de Antequera," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 1 (1964): 375-429; "Las Cortes castellanas en la menor edad de Juan II," *Anales de la Universidad de Murcia XX* (1961-1962), 1-2, f. 68.

7. I am indebted to Heath Dillard for suggesting this connection to me. I have consulted, among other documents, Francisco Layna Serrano's study of the ancient convents of Guadalajara (*Los conventos antiguos de Guadalajara*, Madrid: CSIC, 1943). Layna mentions names related to Leonor's family. "Carrillo," for example, the surname of Leonor's mother, figures prominently.

8. The source for the notarial formulae is Galo Sánchez and V. Granell, eds., "Colección de fórmulas jurídicas castellanas de la Edad Media." *Anales Históricos de España* 2 (1925): 470-91; 3(1926): 476-503.

9. Ayerbe-Chaux calls it "amplification" (1977: 25).

10. See Carol A. Copenhagen, "The *Conclusio* in Fifteenth-Century Spanish Letters," *La Corónica* 14.2 (Spring, 1986): 213-219, and "Salutations in Fifteenth-Century Spanish Vernacular Letters," *La Corónica* 12.2 (Spring, 1984): 254-264.

11. Deyermond notes this (31).

12. See, for further discussion, Aurelio González, *Formas y funciones de los principios en el Romancero viejo*, México, D.F.: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa, 1984.

13. See Louise Mirrer-Singer, *The Language of Evaluation: A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Story of Pedro el Cruel in Ballad and Chronicle* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), Chapter 5.

14. Foucault writes, "In Western societies since the Middle Ages, the exercise of power has always been formulated in terms of law" (87).

15. See Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore and London, 1990), especially Chapter 2.

16. This important point was first made by Kaminsky and Johnson.

17. See *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. by W. Butler-Bowdon (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936).

18. See Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and James Walsh, "Editing Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*: A Progress Report," *Medieval Studies* 38 (1976): 404-427.

19. Ayerbe-Chaux's recent paper ("Leonor López de Córdoba y sus ficciones") argues that the text in fact is a confession: "Las *Memorias*, más que un documento más o menos público de defensa de su honor humillado, es posible que sean una confesión y un examen privado de su vida que entrega Leonor al convento de San Pablo" (2). I believe, however, that the text was in fact meant to be a public document. In a longer version of this paper, I argue that Leonor's concern for her audience and for her own posterity strongly indicate this.

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