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Irrefutable arguments: Teresa de Cartagena defends her right to authorship

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ABSTRACT

Teresa de Cartagena wrote a masterful text of consolation for all who suffer illness or impairment entitled *Arboleda de los enfermos* [*Grove of the Infirm*] in which she recounts her spiritual response to the onset of deafness. The work was maligned, not for its content, but rather because detractors refused to believe that *Arboleda* could have been penned by a woman, especially one who suffered from a physical impairment. Teresa responded to those who doubted her authorship by writing a second text, *Admiración operum Dey* [*Wonder at the Works of God*]. She felt compelled to respond to her critics in order to assert a single, and irrefutable, truth: God gave her the ability to write *Arboleda*, and, since anything is possible for God, to deny her authorship is tantamount to denying the omnipotence of God. She declares that any reader who doubts her authorship does not believe that God is capable of miraculous deeds. She argues that it is rare for a woman to write but certainly not impossible if God so wills it. This article explores how Teresa constructs and builds what, on the surface, appears to be a simple, in not outright indisputable, tenet of Christian doctrine, i.e., God's unlimited and inscrutable power.

KEYWORDS

Admiración operum Dey; *corteza/meollo*; female authorship; Judith; Teresa de Cartagena

Teresa de Cartagena was born in 1424 or 1425 to one of the most important judeo-converso families in Spain. Others in her family were also important authors, including her grandfather, Pablo de Santa Maria (ne Rabbi Šelomó ha-Levi), who after his conversion rose in the ranks of the church, serving as Bishop of Cartagena and later Bishop of Burgos. He also served in the courts of Enrique III and Juan II and wrote primarily theological and historical works. Her uncle, Alonso de Cartagena, was one of the leading humanists of the period, who wrote a history of Spain and translated works by Seneca and Cicero, and who wrote a commentary of Aristotle's *Ethics* (Seidenspinner-Núñez, *The Writings* 4–7). Like all members of her family, Teresa received an excellent education, and she even attests to studying at the University in Salamanca: “los pocos años que yo estudié en el estudio de Salamanca...” (103)¹ [“the few years that I was at the University of Salamanca...”] (80).² Teresa professed as a nun, initially in the order of the Clarisas, and lost her hearing when she was about 29 years old, as Yonsoo Kim has established (*El saber femenino* 45). Some 20 years after becoming deaf, sometime between 1473 and 1479, Teresa penned her first work, *Arboleda de los enfermos* [*Grove of the Infirm*]. She was not confined to a convent because of the onset of her hearing loss, as earlier critics supposed, because she was already a nun in the Order of the Poor Clares in Burgos when she became deaf. When she wrote *Arboleda*, Teresa had changed to the Cistercian order and was probably living at the monastery of Las Huelgas (Kim, *El saber femenino* 34–38).

The bold act of writing as a woman, and a disabled woman at that, in fifteenth-century Spain cannot be ignored. In fact, Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez calls Teresa “thrice marginalized as an author by her gender, her deafness, and her status as a *conversa*” (“‘Él solo me leyó,’” 14). In brief, Teresa’s first treatise, *Arboleda de los enfermos*, is a type of consolation piece in which she discusses how her deafness has actually been a gift from God—one that allows her to pay attention only to the Word of God since she is not distracted by worldly noise or other voices. She invites all who suffer impairment or illness to bear their situation with patience since God will grant some compensation for their suffering. Indeed, in disability one can find the true path to salvation, as Teresa assures her readers that she has done. Teresa’s arguments are scholarly and complex and go far beyond merely praising suffering as a way to participate in the sufferings of Christ as proposed by other religious writers. Precisely because Teresa’s discussion of her physical impairment and the spiritual journey it engendered is so subtle and sophisticated, her role as the author of *Arboleda* was called into question. How could a disabled woman possibly have created such a masterful work?

Teresa decided to directly confront those who doubted her authorship by writing a second text, *Admiración operum Dey* [*Wonder at the Works of God*]. She felt compelled to respond not, I believe, out of any personal vanity or need for recognition but rather to assert a single, and irrefutable, truth: God gave her the ability to write *Arboleda*, and, since anything is possible for God, to deny her authorship is tantamount to denying the omnipotence of God. She declares that any reader who doubts her authorship does not believe that God is capable of miraculous deeds. She argues that it is rare for women to write but certainly not impossible if God so wills it. In the remainder of this article, I want to explore how she constructs and builds what, on the surface, appears to be a simple, in not outright indisputable, tenet of Christian doctrine, i.e., God’s unlimited and inscrutable power.

The text she wrote in response to those who doubted that she had written *Arboleda de los enfermos* was aptly titled *Admiración operum Dey*. The bilingual title—*Admiración*, in the vernacular and the phrase *operum Dey* in Latin—is significant since, by mixing the language most often associated with the illiterate (the vernacular) with Latin (the language of the literate and therefore of men), she subtly hints that she will step into what had heretofore been a male linguistic domain (Seidenspinner-Núñez, “‘Él solo me leyó,’” 17). Nonetheless, she does not initially confront her male detractors openly and adopts the common humility topos, admitting the inherent inferiority of her sex.³ She seemingly professes the Aristotelean concept of woman as “misbegotten male” and the scholastics’ appropriation of it, asserting women’s inferior intellect.⁴ In this way she deflects critics who would accuse her of violating established biological and theological arguments about female inferiority. Teresa uses tenets of orthodox thinking about women to contend that, since she did write *Arboleda*, the book must be considered nothing less than miraculous. How could she, an inferior being, burdened with a disability, possibly write such a treatise? It could only be with the help of God, for she alone would have been incapable. It follows that acknowledging her authorship of *Arboleda* should be celebrated as a great miracle from God. Since God, in his infinite and unfathomable wisdom, can reach out and give talents to even one of the most wretched of creatures, like herself, all should proclaim His bountiful power in granting her the talent to write.

Although *Admiración* is specifically addressed to Juana de Mendoza, the wife of the poet Gómez Manrique, Teresa speaks directly to the detractors of her authorship of *Arboleda*. She begins by saying that some “*prudentes varones e asý mesmo henbras discretas*” (113) [“prudent men and also discreet women”] (87) have cast doubts on her claims to authorship. It is not only men who question her ability to write but even some women. So from the outset, Teresa does not portray herself as a victim of misogyny—rather, she says she is genuinely surprised that “*vna obra pequena, de poca sustança*” (113) [“a brief work of little substance”] (87) should have occasioned such a heated debate. However, I do not see Teresa’s reply to her critics as an attack on

male discourse since she uses theological and philosophical arguments wholly consistent with those used by male authors of her day. As Yonsoo Kim and Juan-Carlos Conde have pointed out, the arguments employed by Teresa often have a note of irony to them, but she is not promoting any type of essentially female discourse in response to male discourse.⁵ Rather, she cleverly uses her vast knowledge to undermine the criticism of her first work, criticism based solely on who wrote it and not on the book's content. As an intellectual and the granddaughter and niece of bishops, she might have welcomed constructive criticism of *Arboleda's* content, but not criticism rooted solely in the identity of the author. Ronald Surtz emphasizes this point and maintains that "Teresa's detractors apparently found no doctrinal errors in [the] treatise. The brouhaha seems to have revolved around the simple fact that the work was composed by a woman" (33). Teresa herself claims that men have marveled at her authorship simply based on the fact that it is rare for women to write, but she argues that rarity is what calls our attention to the miraculous under any circumstances. She asserts that the miraculous workings of God are occurring all around us, every day, but we have come to accept them as commonplace; it is only when a truly unusual or remarkable event occurs that people judge the occurrence to be a divine miracle. Further, she argues that any talent, possessed by anyone, is a gift from God. She contends: "Pues si la suficiencia de los varones de Dios es e Dios la da a cada vno segund la medida del don suyo, ¿por qué razón desconfiaremos las henbras de lo tener en el tiempo oportuno e conveniente como e quando Él sabe que es menester?" (116) ["For if the sufficiency of men comes from God and God gives to each one according to the measure of His gift, why should we women not receive the same when He judges it necessary and appropriate?"] (90). She advocates this level of parity not based on any sense of what we might anachronistically term "social equality," but rather on God's power and his inscrutable plan for human existence. She proclaims:

entención mía no es... de ofender al estado superior e onorable de los prudentes varones, ni tanpoco fauorresçer al fimineo, mas solamente loar la onipotencia e sabiduría e magnificencia de Dios, que asy en las henbras como en los varones puede yspirar e fazer obras de grande admiración e magnificencia a loor y gloria del santo Nonbre... (118)

[my intention... is not to offend the superior and honorable condition of prudent men nor to favor women, but rather to praise the omnipotence and wisdom and greatness of God, who in women as well as men can inspire and effect works of great wonder and magnificence to the praise and glory of His holy name...] (92)

While recognizing male superiority, and thus upholding the basic belief in women's innate inferiority, Teresa, at the same time, erases this duality by promoting even greater truths, namely, that God is capable of anything and that humans can never fathom the Lord's intent. Teresa is careful not to claim that God bestowed on her the talent to write in response to her merits or spiritual virtues because "sabemos que Dios no faze beneficios ni graçias a los honbres por respecto de los méritos de cada vno, mas solamente a respecto de sí mesmo e de su ynestimable bondad..." (120) ["we know that God does not confer blessings or grace according to individual merit but only according to His own inestimable goodness..."] (94). She develops this last point at length and states that to criticize anyone—and she is careful to add, any person, male or female—to whom God has chosen to grant grace is to question God's judgment. Additionally, she avows that God's grace is most bountiful when one sins. This leads her to label sin as a defect of the soul, and since God can grant grace to someone with such a defect, he can also grant it to one who has any other kind of defect, such as physical suffering or, as in Teresa's case, a physical impairment. A long litany follows of reasons why we should praise God for the marvels He performs; craftily inserted into this list, she includes the following phrase: "e sy viéremos que las henbras hazen tractados, e loaremos los dones de la su santa graçia y diuinal largueza" (126) ["and if we see that women write treatises, we shall praise the gifts of His holy grace and divine generosity"] (98). This statement is included in a string of otherwise completely orthodox reasons

for one to praise God, such as seeing a sinner reformed or the just duly rewarded for their good works. By directing the reader's attention, almost relentlessly, toward one's duty to continually admire and marvel at God's blessings to humankind, she truncates objections to a woman's right to authorship since such an achievement is certainly, too, to be considered one of God's marvels. She adds, too, that the only acceptable way to react to God's marvels is by praising and serving the Lord in gratitude, for otherwise one risks offending God. She contends that "aqueste dubdoso maravillillar proçede de aver más respecto a la cosa que avemos que a la Fuente donde deçiende; ca nos acatamos a la facultad o estado de la persona vmana, que no a la grandeza de la potença diuina" (126) ["this doubting wonder proceeds from having more regard for the thing itself than for the fount whence it comes, for we consider only the faculty or condition of the human being⁶ and not the greatness of divine power"] (98).

Teresa develops this theme of offending God, claiming that He is the source of all knowledge given to either men or women, and affirming that we cannot question whom God may choose to instruct. Although her arguments seem to allow for no reproach, nevertheless she reminds the reader, once again, that she is aware of her lowly position and attributes her abilities to God alone: "aquello que a mi entendimiento mugeril se fazía escuro e dificultoso, púdolo fazer claro e ligero Aquél que es verdadera Luz e Sol de justiça" (129) ["whatever was obscure and difficult for my womanly intellect, He who is the true Light and Sun of justice was able to make clear and easy"] (101). But she bristles at the accusations of plagiarism that some had hurled at her; she asserts that she had no other teacher than God and that she did not translate from others' books, "como algunas personas con maliçiosa admiración suelen dezir" (131) ["as some people with malicious wonder are wont to say"] (103). María-Milagros Rivera Garretas describes why Teresa takes such offense to the accusation of plagiarism:

porque esa crítica es utilizada para destruir, a un tiempo, la voz femenina—que copia textos masculinos—y la intimidación femenina que esa voz 'ladrona' ha sacado a la luz: si las palabras de Teresa de Cartagena no son 'auténticas', la experiencia que intentan transmitir—su vida misma—carecen de existencia real, son una mala copia de algo ya dicho y ya vivido por hombres. (288)

[because this criticism is used to destroy, at the same time, the feminine voice—who copies male texts—and the feminine intimacy that her 'plagiarizing' voice has brought to light: if the words of Teresa de Cartagena are not 'authentic,' the experience that they intend to transmit—her very life—lack real existence, and are a bad copy of something already said and already lived by men].

She lapses into prayer, once more stressing her inferior status, even as she pleads for her salvation: "que vea yo luz por la qual la mi tinebrosa e mugeril ynorancia sea alunbrada de los rayos de tu muy alta prudencia" (133) ["may I see the light to illuminate my dark and womanly ignorance with the rays of Your supreme prudence"] (105).⁷ It is as if we have a little push-and-pull within these arguments as she segues from a direct attack on those who accuse her of plagiarism to a recognition of her inferior womanly intellect. Rather than put male readers on the defensive, she returns to a theme they cannot dispute, openly acknowledging her menial female wit. But she quickly returns to her central proposal and bluntly states: "Por ende los que se maravillan dudando del tractado que yo hize, dexen la dubda e maravillense creyendo que fecho es el Señor Refugio del pobre, Ayudador en las oportunidades y en la tribulación" (133–34) ["Therefore, let those who wonder, doubting the treatise I composed, leave their doubt, and let them wonder believing that the Lord is, indeed, the refuge of the poor, our helpmeet in both opportunities and tribulations"] (105).

Teresa never shies away from reminding readers of her own physical impairment—her deafness—and in *Admiración* she reiterates one of the central themes of *Arboleda*, i.e., that God had taken away her ability to hear so her soul could become silent to the things of the world and attentive only to the understanding by which He had enlightened her. She calls God the "justo Juez" (137) ["just Judge"] (108) who wounded her in order to help her on the road to salvation.

As Seidenspinner-Núñez has noted, Teresa directs *Arboleda* to a “virtuous lady” and *Admiración* specifically to Juana de Mendoza as per these ladies’ request, and, by so doing, she disavows having initiated the works of her own volition since she writes to fulfill a petition. Seidenspinner-Núñez adds that addressing her works to women also presumes a receptive female audience and thus “facilitates communication to a more general audience” (*The Writings*, 114). Teresa seems keenly aware that her books will circulate beyond the women to whom they are addressed. In the case of *Arboleda*, she speaks openly and directly to all who suffer or who are infirm, and, in *Admiración*, she directly engages her—largely male—detractors. In order to bolster her claim of authorship, she cites examples from male authorities that these detractors would find difficult, if not impossible, to refute—King David of the Psalms, the Book of Job, Peter Lombard, Pedro de Luna, St. Gregory, to name but a few. In *Admiración* she reiterates that she wrote *Arboleda*, to help all others who suffer—male and female—and in order to illustrate her own anguish and insights she had learned from suffering, she had recourse to her extensive readings and study. Carefully selecting passages from male authorities that underpinned her ideas seems to have formed part of a conscious effort to have *Arboleda* taken seriously. Surprising, at least to Teresa, was the reaction of male readers to her well-argued and carefully constructed treatise. It is her erudition that made her the butt of criticism and false accusations. It is notably ironic that although Teresa quotes many of the same authoritative sources that male authors relied on for their arguments, male readers rejected her appropriation of them in composing *Arboleda*. As earlier noted, it is not the content so much as the source—a woman displaying vast knowledge and writing on a theological subject—with which they took issue.⁸ On this point, Alan Deyermond concludes, “It may be significant that, at a time when such concepts as plagiarism and copyright were unknown, when the incorporation of material from *auctores* was considered an enhancement of a literary work, a woman writer should be accused of dependence on the works of others. It may be, in other words, that in literature as in sex a double standard prevailed” (25).

Teresa’s writing cannot be easily classified as either female autobiography or mystical treatise. While one might argue that the emphasis in the works of many female mystic writers on the corporeal experience of spirituality is parallel to Teresa’s exploration of her own body’s limitation, she does not offer a description of visions or mystical union with the Godhead.⁹ Rather, in *Arboleda* she speaks of finding her way to salvation, and, to keep her mind totally fixed on God, she isolates herself from others. Teresa discusses her decision to not interact with others because, being unable to hear their voices, she feels she would be incapable of responding. Although Teresa possessed the ability to speak since she was not born deaf, her refusal to speak is a self-imposed silence, part of the process of shutting out all but God. This singular mindfulness and the solace it brought her was something she felt compelled to share. The lessons she learned by patiently bearing her disability could be practiced by others as she describes in detail in *Arboleda*.

It is worth noting, too, that Teresa does not write *Admiración* as a general defense of women to write, but rather to convince her critics that her only source of inspiration for writing *Arboleda* was God and no other human source (Deyermond 25). She does not promote an equality of authorship with men as a universal ideal, but rather speaks only of her own personal experience of writing. While her studies obviously prepared her to pen *Arboleda* and, later, *Admiración*, she attributes the inspiration and impetus for writing them solely to divine providence. Her experience of deafness and what she had learned from living with a disability certainly inspired Teresa to write *Arboleda*, and when it came time to defend her literary creation, she takes umbrage with anyone who would question God’s power to grant her the ability to write, and to write well and convincingly. Teresa found the questioning of her authorship “insulting” (Deyermond 24). She even mocks her adversaries, quoting them directly:

se ayan maravillado los prudentes varones del tractado que yo hize, y no porque en él se contenga cosa muy buena ni digna de admiración, mas porque mi propio ser e justo mereçimiento con la adversa fortuna

e acrescentadas pasyones dan bozes contra mí e llaman a todos que se maravillan diciendo: “¿Cómo en persona que tantos males asyentan puede aver algund bien?” (113)

[prudent men have marveled at the treatise I wrote, not because there was anything very good or worthy of wonder in it, but because of me and my justly deserved adversities and increased suffering; they cry out against me and call upon everyone to marvel, saying, “How can there be any good in a person afflicted with so many misfortunes?”] (88)

Alan Deyermond contends that in *Admiración*, Teresa “will not give ground on the main issue: God can endow women with strength and martial valor, as in the story of Judith and Holofernes, so He can certainly give them intellectual power” (25). Teresa’s use of the Biblical Judith to argue that God could accomplish through a woman the defeat of an enemy that could not be accomplished by an army of men has been studied at length by Surtz and others.¹⁰ However, her particular appropriation of this story is worth revisiting in some detail, as it encompasses many of the strategies she uses in her defense in other sections of *Admiración* as well.

In the Book of Judith, Holofernes is the commander of the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Assyrians. In response to the refusal of other nations to come to Nebuchadnezzar’s aid in his war against the King of Arphaxad, Nebuchadnezzar vows revenge on all those who had not responded to his call for assistance. He instructs Holofernes to kill all in his path if other nations do not voluntarily surrender to him. Holofernes wreaks havoc all along the Mediterranean coast, and the people of Judah are terrified that he will attack them and destroy Jerusalem. In response to the threat of a Holofernes attack, the Israelites blocked mountain passes, fortified towns and roadways, and prayed fervently that the Lord would spare them. Holofernes’s army besieges the mountain city of Bethulia, and the Israelites living there urge their leader to surrender to the Assyrian forces. Judith is a widow living in Bethulia who, for over three years after her husband’s death, fasts and wears sackcloth. She is described in Chapter 8 of the Book of Judith as rich, very attractive, and zealously devout. Judith summons the town leaders and admonishes them for their plan to surrender the town. The fact that a woman calls in the male leaders of Bethulia and berates them for their lack of faith in God’s power to help them has direct implications for Teresa’s appropriation of the Judith story for her own purposes. Judith, literally, invades a space usually occupied exclusively by men much in the same way that Teresa invades the space of serious, theological writing, an enclave claimed by the male detractors of *Arboleda*. Kim contends that Judith is a “vivid model of women’s leadership capabilities [that] serves Teresa well to defend the right of women to write” (145).

Judith puts on her finest garments, perfumes herself, and leaves Bethulia.¹¹ When stopped by an Assyrian patrol, she tells them that she is escaping from the Israelites and offers to give Holofernes valuable information on how to defeat them. Judith tells Holofernes that “God has sent me to do something with you that will amaze everyone in the entire world who hears about it” (Judith 11:16). Teresa’s choice for the title of her defense of *Arboleda*—*Admiración operum Dey*—borrows, in part, precisely from language embedded in Judith’s address to Holofernes. When Judith finds herself alone with Holofernes in his tent after a banquet in which the commander had drunk himself into a stupor, she takes Holofernes’s own sword and beheads him. The Assyrians retreat in a panic when they learn that their leader has been tricked and killed by a single Israelite woman. Teresa admits that Judith is an exception to the rule and agrees with men who claim that Judith was able to kill Holofernes because God gave her “yndustria e graçia” (119) [“skill and grace”] (93). Basically, her argument is that physical strength and valor, usually associated with men, was granted by God to a woman for a greater good. As Surtz contends: “[Teresa] is thus able to argue that it is more proper and less remarkable for a woman to write than to wield a sword. By casting swordplay by a woman as a particularly improbable and astonishing instance of female empowerment, her own empowerment to write, while likewise divinely ordained, appears nonetheless to be less transgressive of expected norms of comportment” (31). For her part, Yonsoo Kim comments that Teresa includes the story of Judith since it was familiar

to her audience and upholds the principle that just as Judith's ability to slay Holofernes was granted to her by God, so, too, Teresa's power to write should be attributed to God and not to any special intellectual abilities on her part (145). By not emphasizing her excellent education and dismissing any hint that she possessed the knowledge to author a text such as *Arboleda*, she forestalls any claim to equality with male intelligence. She cleverly downplays her scholarly preparation and again emphasizes that the singularity of her achievement resulted from God's improbable, but nonetheless factual, intervention.

Teresa acknowledges Judith's piety and her observance of all God's laws, but she does not equate herself with Judith in terms of religious zealousness, nor does she see Judith's actions as a reward from God; rather, God granted her grace so that His will could be done. Teresa does not claim that she is as pious as was Judith, contrasting her situation with that of the Biblical heroine. Judith's was a singular case, and one should not deduce from her case that God indiscriminately grants special powers to women: "por quanto esta prudente Iudit era virtuosa e santa muger e grand veladora de la ley de Dios, que por sus méritos buenos Dios le fizo este tan singular beneficio; que no se entiende por eso, que las otras henbras han de rezebir aquesta syngularidad de yndustria e graçia" (120) ["insofar as prudent Judith was a virtuous and holy woman and a great observer of God's law, and because of her excellent merits God conferred this singular blessing upon her, and that, therefore, one should not deduce from this that other women may receive such exceptional skill and grace"] (93). Thus Teresa does not claim any special privilege for women, regardless of an individual's piety and devotion to religious duty. She admits that Judith was a holy woman but insists that God does not mete out grace based on merit but only "de su inestimable bondad" (120) ["according to His own inestimable goodness"] (94).

Teresa does not claim equality with men, and she, in fact, maintains that men or women are inherently different and have different, appropriate roles in life. Luis Miguel Vicente García discusses Teresa's argument that men are physically stronger and braver than women and concludes that she is not acknowledging male superiority but rather a sense of balance necessary for the survival of humanity (98). Teresa uses the metaphor of the *corteza* (bark) and the *meollo* (medulla or pith) of a tree; men are the tough bark that protects women who are the tender inner workings of the plant. Both are necessary for the tree to survive and bear fruit, and so, too, are men's and women's differences necessary for the human race to prosper. As with the allusion to Judith and the audience's familiarity with her story, Teresa's readers would have also known the bark/pith metaphor, sometimes, too, expressed in terms of the shell and the meat of a nut.¹² John Moore traces the metaphor to the twelfth century and Adam von Sankt Victor's coining of the phrase *Nux est Christus* in which he likens the meat of the nut to Christ's divinity and the nut's shell to His human body (6). As with the *corteza/meollo* metaphor where both are needed for the tree to exist and thrive, both Christ's divinity and his coming to earth in a human body were necessary elements in the plan for salvation.

Like Teresa's references to the Judith story, this rhetorical motif deserves a closer look to appreciate her subtle manipulation of a well-known image. Teresa actually reverses the usual meaning of the *corteza/meollo* metaphor. In his article, "Conventional Botany or Unorthodox Organics?," John Moore asserts that "Teresa inverts the traditional patristic model by associating males with the deceptive surface-level reality of *corteza*, which recalls images of the body and which is normally associated with woman. She then aligns females with the sacrosanct interior space of *meollo*, which was a realm reserved for the masculine soul and which stood for true and hidden meaning" (7). *Corteza* in the metaphor commonly stood for superficiality or surface understanding of a concept or idea, whereas the *meollo* meant the deep meaning accessible only to those of keen intellect. If Teresa associates men with the rough surface surrounding the softer female tissues inside, then it is actually women who possess what Moore calls "legitimate intelligence" (9). Moore traces the use of the word *meollo*, beginning with *El Libro de Alexandre* in which *meollo* is equated to *seso*, or good sense or judgment. Alfonso X in the *Siete Partidas*

declares that *seso* resides in the *meollo de la cabeza* (Moore 9). Also, this same critic argues that from a purely botanical standpoint, the *meollo* of many plants is considered to be the edible and, therefore, preferable part (8–9). While Moore and Siedenspinner-Núñez clearly assert that Teresa’s use of the *corteza/meollo* metaphor is subversive with regard to patristic teaching about woman’s inferior intellectual status (Moore 7; Seidenspinner-Núñez, “Él solo me leyó” 20), Surtz sees her arguments not so much as the case of one gender being inferior or superior but rather that Teresa sees both the *corteza* and the *meollo* as essential and codependent parts.¹³ Moore concludes, with regard to Teresa’s particular manipulation of the *corteza/meollo* metaphor: “By linking women with the extra-textual meanings of *meollo*, Teresa’s cause of justifying her ability to write and be a godly woman of intelligence is furthered, whether or not she intended that to be the case” (11).

Teresa further expands on the use of this metaphor by equating the strong outer bark of the tree with men’s strength and courage, which defends weak women, who are enclosed inside their houses, far from the “the rigors and dangers inherent in government and defense ... where they help by devoting themselves to domestic tasks” (Surtz 26). By using the *corteza/meollo* metaphor to assert that women’s proper place is in the home and not in public spaces rightly occupied by men, she averts any accusation that she is advocating for women’s participation in activities or spaces traditionally within the purvey of men. Teresa contrasts the “muger andariega” [“woman who gads about”] and the “muger ynclusa” [“woman who stays home”].¹⁴ I quote the pertinent passage as an example of how Teresa advocates for women’s enclosure as part of God’s plan for the good of the species:

algunas mugeres comunes ... salen de su casa amenudo e andan vagando por casa ajenas, las quales, por esta mala costunbre, se fazen asý negligentes e perezosas en el exerciçio fimíneo e obras domésticas y caseril, que ellas por esto no valen más e su hazienda e casa valen menos.... las henbras estando ynclusas dentro de las puertas de su casa se exerçen en sus propios e onestos ofiçios ... (138)

[some common women ... frequently leave their houses and go wandering through the houses of other people; because of this bad custom, they become negligent and lazy in womanly duties and domestic and household chores, and they do not benefit from this habit; rather, their household and home suffer ... women enclosed within the doors of their home exercise their proper and honest duties ...] (109)

Teresa concludes these observations about woman’s proper place with a long discussion of the three faculties of the soul—understanding, memory, and will. She says that the woman who gads about has her understanding focused primarily on things of the world, whereas the woman who stays at home can concentrate on spiritual matters and thus exercise wisely the faculty of understanding. However, as Rocío Quispe points out, whereas Teresa obviously values spiritual understanding as superior to concern with worldly matters, she does negate the power of women to possess the faculty of understanding: “Bueno o malo, lo que observamos aquí es que Teresa hace equivalentes mujer y entendimiento. Al mismo tiempo que los prejuicios de su época se hacen presentes (al hablar de la ‘mujer andariega’), el sujeto desbarata aquél según el cual no puede haber entendimiento en la mujer” (96) [“Good or bad, what we observe here is that Teresa establishes an equivalency between woman and understanding. At a time when the prejudices of her era are ever present (speaking of the ‘woman who gads about’), the subject disrupts the idea that women lack the faculty of understanding”]. Quispe adds that not only does Teresa attribute understanding to women but also indicates that the “good woman”—she who stays at home and tends to domestic obligations—possesses superior, spiritual understanding to those who are always in the public spaces, most frequently occupied by men (96).¹⁵

With her extended discussion of women and the power of understanding, Teresa gets in some gentle jibes on male superiority. Even though she contends that women should stay out of the public sphere, they actually possess a superior kind of understanding to those who participate in more worldly matters, i.e., men. In a similar vein, Seidenspinner-Núñez notes that Teresa uses

the Biblical story of woman being created as a helpmate to man to question whether true strength lies in the one in need of help, i.e., man, or in the helper, i.e., women (“‘Él solo me leyó,” 18):

De ser la hembra ayudadora del varón, leámoslo en el Génesy, que después que Dios ovo formado del onbre del limo de la tierra e ovo yspirado en él espíritu de vida, dixo: “No es bueno que sea el onbre solo; hagásmole adjutorio semejante a él.” E bien se podría aquí arguir qual es de mayor vigor, el ayudado o el ayudador: ya vedes lo que a esto responde la razón. (118)

[We read in Genesis how woman is the helpmeet of man, for after God had formed man from the mud of the earth and had breathed in him the spirit of life, He said, “It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a help like unto himself.”¹⁶ And one could well argue here whether the helped or the helper has the greater strength, and you clearly see what reason would respond.] (92)

But Teresa never openly argues for female superiority or even equality with men. In fact, Teresa speaks of men’s preeminence in terms of physical strength and valor, which makes them most suited to rule, govern, and defend the land. In contrast, she says women are not suited to such tasks because they are weak and timid, but nonetheless contribute to the greater good with their domestic labors. Both gender roles are necessary, she asserts:

Asý qu’estas priminençias ya dichas de los varones, ser valientes e de grand ánimo e suficiente entendimiento, ni otra alguna que Dios les aya dado non es en perxuyzio de las henbras, ni la flaqueza e pusilanimidad del estado fimineo le ortoga por eso, mayor eçelencia al varón. Mas estas contraridades son vna maravillosa dispuysçión que la muy alta sabiduría de Dios hordenó. (118)

[Thus, neither these pre-eminences of men—to be brave and of great spirit and sufficient understanding—nor any other that God may have given them is to the detriment of women, nor likewise does the weakness and timidity of the female condition confer greater excellence to the male. Rather these opposites are a marvelous arrangement ordered by God’s great wisdom.] (92)

Teresa uses authoritative texts, extensive quotes from Scripture, and familiar metaphors to push back at patriarchal beliefs about women’s lack of understanding and restriction on self-expression. While she, at times, uses her sources ironically, overall she is less interested in defending womankind in general than in defending her own intellectual production.¹⁷ Teresa’s complaint against her detractors lies solely and firmly in the fact that some readers refuse to recognize God’s infinite power in granting a feeble and disabled female the gift of intellect. By strict reliance on established Christian doctrine, albeit with a few gentle taunts directed toward her male critics, she left no room for “alternative facts” and, essentially, forestalled any further criticism of her authorial talent.

Notes

1. All quotes from *Arboleda de los enfermos* and *Admiración operum Dey* are from the edition by Lewis Joseph Hutton (Anejo del Boletín de la Real Academia Española, Anejo XVI, 1967).
2. All English translations are from *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena* by Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez (D.S. Brewer, 1998).
3. Fernando Gómez Redondo notes that “la habilidad de Teresa de Cartagena es extraordinaria, por cuanto no va a atacar directamente a aquellos que la habían criticado, sino que va a componer un tratado en el que, a la par de defender su capacidad para escribir sobre esas materias, impartirá lección de humildad y enseñará a sus detractores a ‘admirarse’ de lo que ella ha logrado con buen sentido y no con las malicias con que se acogiera su primer opúsculo...” (III: 3066) [“the ability of Teresa de Cartagena is extraordinary in that she does not directly attack those who had criticized her, but rather she composes a treatise in which, at the same time, she defends her ability to write about those materials and imparts a lesson in humility and teaches her detractors to ‘wonder’ at what she has accomplished with good sense and not with the malice with which her first work was received...”].
4. John Moore affirms that “patristic theology created a male/female dualism that associated the interior virtuous soul with the masculine and the exterior corruptible body with the feminine” (5).

5. See Yonsoo Kim's book *Between Desire and Passion: Teresa de Cartagena* (Brill, 2012) and Juan-Carlos Conde's review of it, published in vol. 45, no. 1, 2016 of *La Corónica*, pp. 157–67.
6. In this case, a woman with a disability.
7. It is worth noting that as a woman with a physical disability, Teresa cited immediately before this passage the Biblical story of the blind man asking Jesus to give him his sight, as a metaphor for asking for spiritual insight and understanding. See Luke 18:41.
8. Rivera Garretas comes to a similar conclusion, stating “la crítica de la época descalificó *Arboleda de los enfermos* con el argumento de que las mujeres no eran capaces ni de ser autoras ni hacer ciencia. Esa crítica no descalificó esa obra recurriendo, por ejemplo, a limitaciones o lagunas en los conocimientos de Teresa de Cartagena. La descalificó, pues, sosteniendo que el saber no es objetivo sino sexuado” (291) [“criticism of the time discredited *Grove of the Infirm* with the argument that women were incapable of being authors or making science. That criticism did not discredit the work by citing, for example, limitations or omissions in Teresa de Cartagena's knowledge. They discredited it, sustaining that wisdom is not objective but rather determined by one's sex”].
9. María Mar Cortés Timoner devotes a book-length study to Teresa as a mystic author—*Teresa de Cartagena: Primera escritora mística en lengua castellana* [*Teresa de Cartagena: The First Female Mystic Writing in Castilian*] (Universidad de Málaga, 2004). She correctly points out some parallels between Teresa de Cartagena and Teresa de Ávila—most importantly, perhaps the fact that they both suffered severe illness. The central difference, however, is that Teresa de Cartagena received spiritual illumination and insight through the experience of deafness but denies any spiritual union with God. She did not write at the behest of her confessors, as did Teresa de Ávila, in an attempt to explain the almost inexpressible experience of her intimate encounters with God. Teresa's main concern in *Arboleda* is consoling fellow sufferers, and she does not present her situation as unique. Anyone can learn the lesson of patience in suffering in order to become more dependent on God and stay on the true path to salvation. She repeats these themes in *Admiración* while also defending her first treatise as an act of compassion toward all who are ill or disabled.
10. See Surtz's analysis on pp. 30–35 of his book, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*. See also pp. 144–47 of Yonsoo Kim's *Between Desire and Passion* and p. 211 of María Mar Cortés Timoner's *Teresa de Cartagena: Primera escritora mística en lengua castellana*.
11. Kim notes that this description is not intended to accent Judith's sensuality or powers of seduction, but rather to accentuate her virtuousness. She contends that “In this narrative shift from a description of a sensual woman to an allegorization of the virtuous lady, Judith is now transformed into a worthy female figure that can personify goodness, humility, fortitude, and justice” (*Between Desire and Passion*, 146).
12. See for example, Gonzalo de Berceo's use of the *corteza/meollo* motif in the introduction to the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* in strophe 16 after his extended metaphor of the meadow and its delights:

Señores e amigos, lo que dicho avemos
palavra es oscurua, esponerla queremos;
tolgamos la corteza, al meollo entremos,
prendamos lo de dentro, lo de fuera dessemos. (565)

[Gentle people and friends, what we have just said is an obscure parable and we wish to explain it. Let us remove the husk and get into the marrow. Let us take what is within, and what is without, let us leave aside.] (15)

Juan Ruiz uses other variations on the *corteza/meollo* metaphor in strophe 17 of the *Libro de buen amor*:

El axenuz de fuera más negro es que caldera;
es de dentro muy blanco, más que la peña vera;
blanca farina está so negra cobertera;
açucar dulce e blanco está en vil caña vera. (113)

[The fennel seed outside is blacker than old cook-pots on chains,
But on the inside whiter still than ermine's winter mane.
White flour lies hid with the black case of the wheat's dry grain;
And sugar, sweet and white, hides in the humble sugarcane.] (31)
13. Surtz summarizes by stating that “the bark is not more important than the pith nor is the pith more important than the bark” (28).
14. See the chart contrasting the attributes of these two types of women on p. 96 of Rocío Quispe's article, “El espacio medieval femenino entre la escritura y el silencio: *Admiración operum Dey* de Teresa de Cartagena.”
15. Quispe further states that “La monja castellana escribe acerca de su espacio y lo valoriza feminizándolo en su discurso. Se trata del espacio de la ‘cogitación’ y del ‘estudio espiritual’ y no solo de la contemplación

pasiva sino de la reflexión activa que lleva a la producción intelectual” (97) [“The Castilian nun writes about her space and gives it value by feminizing it in her discourse. It is a space for ‘thinking’ and ‘spiritual study’ and not only for passive contemplation, but for active reflection that leads to intellectual production”].

16. Genesis 2:18.

17. On this point, see Moore, p. 10.

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