

*Memoria e comunità femminili: Spagna e Italia, secc. XV–XVII.*  
*Memoria y comunidades femeninas: Espana e Italia, siglos XV-XVII.*  
Eds. Gabriella Zarri and Nieves Baranda Leturio. Firenze: Firenze University Press; Madrid: UNED, 2011. 219 pp. € 14,90. ISBN 978-8-8645-3289-9.

The history of female religious communities has been a thriving domain for the study of gender and the production of culture in Western societies. *Memoria e comunità femminili/Memoria y comunidades femeninas* provides an important and up-to-date addition to the historiography in this field. The volume addresses the creation of memory within early modern Italian and Spanish convents from 1450 to 1650. The result of an international conference with the participation of Italian and Spanish scholars, its ten chapters alternate between Italy and Spain, and maintain a rigorous bilingual component in order to explore a series of individual case studies of nuns as authors and subjects of memory recording. Brief but wide-ranging, this volume raises a number of questions that go beyond issues of gender, culture and religion, in order to explore the relevance and meanings that religious women attributed to the preservation of written and oral memory in its spiritual, social, and political dimensions, as well as the intellectual and creative potentialities and constraints associated with monastic institutions.

The volume clearly seeks to connect monastic memory to widely debated aspects of the historiography on memory, drawing on notions of female authorship and authority; the conceptual links connecting memory, biography, autobiography; and the part played by orality in the construction of written memory. Following a chronological and mainly thematic order, the volume discusses the different forms and genres of memory writing: spiritual tracts of nuns and saints, chronicles, reports on monastic foundations, letters, and rules, showing that these texts reflected both the individual and the collective memory of the community. In the first chapter, Elisabetta Graziosi focuses on the writings of two fifteenth-century Franciscan nuns from the same community: the mystic author Caterina da Bologna and her biographer Illuminata Bembo. Graziosi examines the importance they attributed to the act of remembering for the continuity of female spiritual models to future generations of nuns. Spiritual memory

is also analyzed by Angela Muñoz, who explores the links between praying, remembering and commemorating in the *Libro de devociones* (*Book of Devotions*) by the Dominican Costanza de Castilla. María del Mar Graña Cid draws on two well-known Franciscan texts, the *Vita Christi* (*Life of Christ*) by Isabel de Villena and the book of sermons, *El libro del conorte* (*Book of Consolation*) by Juana de la Cruz, in order to show the ways in which these two authors used the evangelical tradition with reference to the discourse on the female sex and to the early *querelle des femmes*. Gabriella Zarri focuses on a manuscript version of the *Vita* of the sixteenth-century Dominican nun Lucia da Narni. Zarri considers issues of authorship and authenticity and the complexity of life-writing as a genre that defies rigid classifications, particularly within a monastic context, where manuscript practices survived well after the advent of print. María Leticia Sánchez Hernández studies the letters by the early seventeenth-century Augustinian nun and convent founder Mariana de San José in order to map her network and to illustrate the plurality of contacts and relationships with women and men outside her convent; Mercedes Marcos Sánchez analyzes the letters by the Franciscan Clara de Jesús María, drawing on the archival practices that allowed for their preservation. The legal procedures associated with the canonization of holy nuns, and the importance of the nuns' ability to remember their spiritual sisters' lives, are the focus of Anna Scattigno's discussion of three Florentine nuns: Domenica da Paradiso, Caterina de' Ricci, and Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi. Scattigno points out the extent to which the construction of memory was a collective act created by many female voices in oral and written form. María Carmen Marín Pina explores the problematic issue of authorship of the book of meditations, *El año santo*, attributed to Luisa Magdalena Enríquez Manrique de Lara, a Carmelite connected to the court of Philip IV. Nieves Baranda Leturio turns to the narratives of convent foundations in Catalonia and Valencia and the intersection between historical writing and biography. Maria Pia Paoli concludes the volume with an analysis of the male-authored biographies of Tuscan women venerated as saints, or potential saints, and speculates on their function for both local religious politics and the universal aims of the Catholic church.

Nearly all the volume's chapters show that one of the distinctive elements of the creation of monastic memory is its internal/external focus, recording both the inner life of the religious community and its connections with larger outside contexts: the city, the court, the nuns' families and patrons, their acquaintances, and devout followers. In this light, the chapters rarely lose sight of the different contexts and circumstances associated with the writing of memory: the presence in the monastic community of learned and influential nuns with strong connections to the elites, the advent of spiritual and institutional monastic reforms, the impact on convents of political dynamics and events, and the tensions between local and centralized powers, including the Catholic church.

The discussion of the relationship between written and oral memory cuts across different chapters. The volume emphasizes, on the one hand, the authority of the female voice in the monastic process of memory creation, which was maximized by the nuns' practices of writing, record-keeping, and extending beyond the space of community, as they and their correspondents meticulously preserved their writings in their archives. On the other hand, the nuns' oral memory and their testimony as eyewitnesses acquired authority in ecclesiastical and political matters, for example, when reconstructing the histories of convent foundations and of early or charismatic members. Eyewitness oral testimonies held legal value and the religious community's ability to remember and speak in order to attest to the words, actions, mystical experiences, and miracles of their holy companions was fundamental in promoting female holiness.

The materiality of female memory and its layers across time are discussed in the volume. Traces of material memory are to be found in the convent's internal and external spaces, their shape, and structure: the visible commemorative inscriptions that marked its interiors, the decorative apparatus in the church or the refectory, and the artistic commissions paid for by families and patrons. The material memory of the community also revolved around the nuns' bodies, particularly saints' bodies, as the community had direct responsibility for their preservation. Equally important was the preservation of the objects associated with nuns, such as the "passion" instruments with which they disciplined themselves, later venerated as relics: hair-shirts, cilices, rough ropes and other objects, which also held legal

value as material witnesses in canonization procedures. By giving attention to these material issues, the volume shares in the scholarly research on martyrs, including those martyred in wars, and the political importance of their burial sites for historical memory.

Although the volume is extremely successful in conveying to the reader a clear sense of the great richness of convent writings and documents and the determination with which female monastic communities pursued the creation of their own memory, it gives priority to official memory and to the exemplarity and exceptionality of the objects of memory making. With few exceptions, the memory of the ordinary, everyday actions and things, is left unexplored, even though monastic archives often document less official and less exclusive versions of individual and collective memory, such as chronicles and books of accounts. Furthermore, some chapters discuss writings that, however intriguing, are not directly associated with the construction of memory and were not necessarily written for that purpose. Their analysis would have benefited from a more extensive discussion of the ways in which they link to an overall concept of memory, beyond the fact that they attest to the workings of female monastic institutions and are therefore important sources for scholarship in this field. One would also have appreciated more attention to the circulation of the texts analyzed in the chapters: for whom they were originally written. Finally, it is a pity that this collection of essays, which focuses on the convents of two Catholic European countries, does not raise — even briefly — the issue of comparative analysis and the challenges of studying the history of female monastic institutions in a comparative perspective, given that the extensive scholarship now available on female religious communities is ripe for this kind of analysis. These minor issues, however, do nothing to diminish the importance of the volume's rich contribution to the history of gender, the construction of memory, and female monastic institutions. *Memoria e comunità femminili/Memoria y comunidades femeninas* remains stimulating reading for future research in, among other disciplines, history, literature, and gender studies.

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