CHAPTER THREE

DEVIL WITH A BLACK OR BROWN DRESS ON: WOMEN RELIGIOUS AS VENTRILOQUISTS OF SATAN

In early modern Spain and colonial Latin America, devils appeared everywhere, but most especially in women's bodies and minds. Inquisitional records reflect that concern. Cases in almost every category of crime that the Holy Office prosecuted—from blasphemy to judaizing, from false visions to witchcraft—include a role for the Devil and/or his minions. Although in the colonies at least, as Fernando Cervantes has demonstrated, Satan had lost some of his power by the end of the seventeenth century, nevertheless evoking his presence continued to be a part of inquisitional accusations, denunciations, and testimony. Some women, especially nuns, played out the battle between (Catholic) good and evil inside their bodies, minds, and souls. And, whole categories of women—hechiceras (witches), for instance—were viewed as consort ing with him, while other, individual women were perceived as having had (often sexual) commerce with the fallen archangel. In this chapter, collective possession inside convent walls will be discussed. Two groups of nuns—supposedly the holiest of women—in whose trials before the Inquisition a pact with the devil played a central role illustrate the pitfalls of assignment to womanhood, even when buttressed by vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty.

There were many cases (some judged false)—both individual and collective, in convents and in secular life—of women possessed by the Devil. Scholars have studied a few well-known individuals, especially in Latin America. Several beatas in seventeenth-century Querétaro, Mexico, the most renowned of which was Juana de los Reyes, and María Pizarro in late sixteenth-century Lima, Peru, are perhaps the most notable.2

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1 See his The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) for a detailed discussion of this development.
Of proceedings that involved group possession, perhaps the most famous accused were the Ursulines in Loudun, France in 1632. After a local cleric, Urbain Grandier, refused to become the spiritual director of the convent, a group of nuns accused him of having cursed them, and of having introduced a demon (Asmodai) into the monastery. In Spain, the famous example of the Benedictine nuns of San Plácido in Madrid and their confessor Father Francisco García Calderón followed a different trajectory. Several of the women, but especially the abbess, Doña Teresa Valle de la Cerda, were accused of being possessed by the Devil; Sor Teresa was imprisoned in a convent in Toledo for many years. In 1638, after almost a decade, she was declared innocent. The extant documents from this case, including four statements by Sor Teresa Valle, have been much-studied by modern scholars. In the colonies as well there were several cases, including the Convent of Santa Clara in Trujillo, Peru. Their spiritual director left a narrative in which he mentions two others: one in Italy with eighty possessed women and the other in Portugal, with seventy possessed nuns. Given the ideology of gender roles that predominated at the time, according to which women in general were seen as having a propensity to temptation, it is natural that nuns particularly would be suspected of pacts with the devil and of possession. Although they were dedicated to religious goals, they lived in groups, in conditions of mutual daily, intimate contact. Ironically, the very same rules that religious Orders imposed, which separated cloistered women from the world and from men (except priests), caused the expectation of collective possession.

**Interpretations of the Devil, Then and Now**

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, many scholars have taken on the task of deciphering the ideologies and ordinary popular