A NEW WAY OF LIVING?
LUISA DE CARVAJAL AND THE LIMITS OF MYSTICISM

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In the mid-1620s, almost two dozen people gave testimony at the abortive investigation into the sanctity of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza. She had died a dozen years earlier, on 2 January 1613/14, in the English capital city of London, where she had lived for the last nine years of her life. With good reason she can be regarded as one of the first, if not the first, female missionary of modern times.¹

What the woman who knew her best had to say about her saintliness was as honest as it was unhelpful. Inés de la Asunción testified that Luisa was not regarded “as a woman of revelations but rather of great virtue and insight”.² She also remembered her mistress had said nothing about “whether she had or not any revelations, raptures or ecstasies”, adding that in fact she was “very much against these things”. She concentrated instead on giving evidence about Luisa’s “solid virtues”.³ Inés had known her for 13 years, having shared in her life of poverty and good works before being abruptly ordered into a convent when her mistress abandoned Spain for her ultimate destination, Protestant England. Luisa was undoubtedly a saint as far as Inés was concerned, but her companion would not claim that the proof of this lay in her mystical gifts. Nor was she alone in downplaying this aspect of her mistress’s spiritual life. Isabel de la Cruz, another companion, recalled

¹ The manuscript records of the inquiry are to be found in a series of boxes in the Convento de la Encarnación in Madrid. These include the majority of letters to and from Luisa. Though scrupulously preserved, they are not formally catalogued, and it is only possible to identify the dozens of documents by a very simple description. “Proceso” refers to the legajo of 700 folios and more of formal depositions; I also make use here of Inés’s Draft Submission, as well as a letter from a Jesuit priest, Blackfan. For more information, see Glyn Redworth, The She-Apostle: The Extraordinary Life and Death of Luisa de Carvajal (Oxford, 2008).
² “no la tenían por mujer de rebalaciones sino de gran birtud y luz” (Convento de la Encarnación, Madrid, Proceso, f. 278v). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.
³ “si tubo o no Reuelaçiones o raptos o estassis o como los llaman...y a mi no me toca el saber ni hablar desto, si no en las solidas virtudes que en este Angel ui” (Convento de la Encarnación, Madrid, Inés’s Draft Submission, f. 30).
that Luisa was far too discreet to talk about visions, a reticence confirmed by Fernando de Espinosa, a 63-year-old Jesuit who had known her in Madrid and Valladolid. He reported being unable to recall “if the holy doña Luisa had said or related anything in particular about any interior gifts”, though he added that she had intimated, in very general terms, that these gifts were great indeed.

In light of these lukewarm remarks, we should consider why it is that we are discussing Luisa in the context of mysticism. Probably it is no more than a reflection of the normalizing process which occurs whenever we write about female religiosity in this period. Given the gigantic shadow cast by that incomparable mystic, Teresa de Ávila, both in her lifetime and over later historiography, all religious women of early modern Spain tend to be compared with her. The gradual process of rediscovering Luisa de Carvajal pulls in one direction at the same time as a Teresian counterweight drags us in another; much as we try to reclaim Luisa as a unique religious female in her own right, we are pushed towards evaluating her achievements according to ways set down for the towering figure of Santa Teresa. Luisa’s story is a case study in the limits of mysticism.

Who was Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza? Born in 1566 in Extremadura, on her mother’s side she was a Mendoza, “Spain’s richest and most powerful family”, according to Helen Nader. On her father’s side she came from the immensely rich Carvajal clan. Her paternal grandfather was bishop of Plasencia. Jaraicejo, the town where she was born, belonged to the bishop. Luisa was orphaned at an early age and went to live in the convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid with a maternal great-aunt, María Chacón, governess to Philip II’s children and mother of Bernardo de Rojas, the future archbishop of Toledo and sometime Inquisitor General. Around the age of ten, when Chacón died, Luisa went to live with her mother’s brother, Don Francisco Hurtado de Mendoza, third count of Monteagudo and first marquis of Almazán. When he returned to Spain after serving as an ambassador in Vienna, he coddled his niece, drawn by her intellect and perhaps

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4 Convento de la Encarnación, Madrid, Proceso, f. 200.
5 There were technical reasons why the case for Luisa’s sainthood failed, not least because around this time the papacy altered the rules for canonization. See Redworth, The She-Apostle, pp. 227–28.