



PROJECT MUSE®

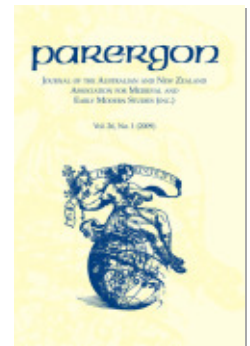
Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World
(review)

Ivan Cañadas

Parergon, Volume 26, Number 1, 2009, pp. 239-241 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and
Early Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.0.0099>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362882>

maps. Yet, despite the growing knowledge gained through increasing contact with other lands, both in the New World and South-east Asia, speculative representation of the antipodes persisted.

This is a very useful compendium of ideas and information about historical geography and science. The scholarship is exemplary and the range of sources drawn on is masterful. This is a beautiful looking book, well illustrated with clear manuscript and printed images of early maps and diagrams. I know that this is one work I will be continually consulting. It is also one that I will be recommending to colleagues working on Australian and New Zealand history.

Judith Collard

*Department of History and Art History
University of Otago*

Howe, Elizabeth Teresa, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World), Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008; hardback; pp. xvi, 240; 12 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. £55.00; ISBN: 9780754660330.

In her preface to this well-researched study, Elizabeth Howe suggests that, though under-represented in the early modern Hispanic literary world, some women *did* ‘take up the pen’ and this fact raises questions about their education and their roles as advocates for the education of other women (pp. x-xi).

The first chapter traces classical ideas which ‘came to fruition in the Renaissance’ (p. 1), along with biblical exempla, which Patristic writers like Saint Jerome appropriated, passing over female heroism and other so-called ‘masculine’ or ‘Amazonian’ traits while praising the female ‘embrace of chastity’ (p. 7). Howe also addresses the Renaissance ‘*querelle des femmes*’, discussing Boccaccio and Jean de Meun, and their respondent, Christine de Pizan, who argued, in the *Book of the City of Ladies* (1404), that women’s ‘natural curiosity’ equips them for intellectual pursuits (p. 15).

Indeed, Howe shows that intellectual women routinely hijacked patriarchal arguments about gender difference. Thus, Sor Juana de Cartagena argued that, just as it is ‘easier to accept eloquence in a woman than physical strength ... it is easier for a woman to wield a pen than the sword’ (p. 27). Likewise, when female dramatist Maria de Zayas (1590-1661/9) revisited ‘the question of educating women’, she maintained ‘women’s aptitude for letters’ (p. 145).

Chapter 2 examines Isabel of Castile's educational initiatives, from efforts to 'remedy the deficiencies of her own early education' (p. 42) to her commissioning of dictionaries and grammars for the 'ladies of her court' (p. 43). Howe also notes Isabel's exemplary role, 'influenc[ing] other women to undertake study' (p. 44), all the more significant in the context of recommendations by humanists (discussed in Chapter 4), that even the daughters of royalty should do domestic chores (p. 104). Nevertheless, Isabel's image was open to patriarchal re-inscription, transformed in a eulogy given by the royal confessor, from powerful queen into a 'faithful wife and mother' (pp. 39-40).

Chapter 3 explores Saint Teresa's overcoming of the obstacles of her mercantile background and Jewish origins – as well as a 'middling level of education', which, Howe argues, makes Saint Teresa 'an example of the nature and extent of it' in the period (p. 62). Yet, Teresa skilfully deployed a rhetoric of female subordination, 'bow[ing] to the authority of male confessors and *letrados*' to attain her ends (p. 68). Beyond gender, this rhetoric of intellectual modesty was a shrewd move by a monastic reformer who wanted to avoid accusations of Protestantism (p. 71). It is also ironic that literacy was a rarely-waived requirement for entry into the discalced Carmelite order, in which solitary reading and meditation were an integral component of daily life (p. 74).

Chapter 4 considers the inclusion of pens and books in religious iconography before broaching the broader issues announced in the title: 'Home [and] School[ing] for Girls in Spain and New Spain'. Firstly, Howe discusses representations of the Virgin Mary and of Saint Anne in educational roles; for instance, Mary was portrayed 'with the Christ Child and an open book or with pen and ink', whereby 'the role of mother as teacher is underscored' (p. 94).

Also discussed in Chapter 4, however, is the canon of humanist treatises, represented by the work of Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540). Vives argued that Woman's capacity to attain virtue is severely limited due to her natural 'ignorance', which 'precludes her from reading edifying works such as the Fathers of the Church' (p. 101). Moreover, Howe observes that, unlike the writings of elite female intellectuals, works by male humanists – such as Vives' *Instrucción de la mujer cristiana* (1528), reprinted seven times in the sixteenth century – were widely read, arguably indicating their influence upon the education of girls (p. 99).

Chapter 5 explores commentaries on women's education. For example, Doña Oliva de Sabuca de Nantes defended her decision 'to write in the vernacular' and 'decree[d]' the pretentious – and exclusionary – 'use of Latin over the vernacular by contemporaries' (p. 135). Howe also discusses female dramatists, Maria de Zayas, and Ana Caro, and concludes that their participation in a male-dominated arena was more significant than their plays, for the unruly femininity in their plays ultimately only 'affirm[s]' conventions 'with a feminine twist' (p. 155).

Howe's final chapter is devoted to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-95), whose career illustrates the patriarchal containment of female exemplarity through the praise of 'uniqueness' (p. 158). As a nun, of illegitimate birth, and also marginalized by her birth in colonial Mexico – though white and relatively wealthy – Sor Juana found some independence in the clergy; but, even in the Hieronymite order – allowed to pursue her scholarly interests and to maintain an intellectual circle (pp. 163-4) – she would be 'caught up in the maelstrom of secular and religious currents within her society' (p. 159). Her work included secular plays, scriptural criticism and the defences of women's right to education, which attracted perhaps the harshest censure. The unauthorized publication of an epistolary debate about women's intellectuality and further controversy following her defence, the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (1690), led to her retirement from scholarly and literary pursuits for her remaining years (p. 183). Sor Juana associated herself with learned women of the past, particularly with 'monastic women'. Stressing their 'exemplarity', she implicitly defined herself as 'a worthy model to be imitated by other women' (p. 178).

Sor Juana's withdrawal from the public and intellectual spheres, and her celebration in the posthumous editions of her works, sums up the central argument of Howe's study. Devoting herself 'to nursing her fellow nuns', until her own death during an epidemic (p. 183), Sor Juana ironically conformed to the norms of domesticity which she had formerly breached, while her posthumous lionising as a literary 'phoenix' served to marginalize and limit her 'exemplarity' (pp. 184-5).

I recommend this study for its well-researched insight into what, until recently, was a largely unexplored area of study: the intellectual lives of Early Modern women in the Spanish-speaking world.

Ivan Cañadas
Department of English
Hallym University