Mother Jerónima de la Fuente:
A Woman Religious and Reflection of Christ

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This paper examines the issues of gender, the body, and convent life and art that surround the subject of Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente* (1620, Madrid, Museo del Prado; autograph copy c. 1620, Madrid, Fernández Araoz Collection).[1] Doña Jerónima (1555-1630), a Poor Clare, or Franciscan nun, was the foundress and abbess of Santa Clara de la Concepción, the first convent of nuns in the Philippines. The inscription on the painting indicates that she left the convent of Santa Isabel de los Reyes in Toledo for Manila in 1620, at the age of sixty-six. Before leaving Spain, she stopped in Seville, where Velázquez painted her portrait. In his portrait, Velázquez conveys Jerónima's devoutness and strength of character through her stern expression and rugged countenance; her direct, outward gaze at the beholder; and her expressive accoutrements—the dark, sober habit, and the tome and Crucifix in her hands. The texts included on the canvas are equally revealing; the inscription across the top of the canvas reads, "It is good to await the salvation of God in silence," and a ribbon flows from her mouth stating, " I shall be satisfied as long as He is glorified."[2]

My analysis of the issues concerning the painting will provide a historical context for the work. I will discuss here the nature of women's roles in Spain's Golden Age and examine how they compare to those of "women religious," whose spiritual lives commonly undermined both the subordination of women by society, and nuns by the church. I will also investigate the treatment of the body in the penitential activities of nuns, the function of art in convents, and Jerónima's

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[1] This paper was written as part of the McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program, in which I worked as a research assistant for Professor Tanya J. Tiffany. Professor Tiffany assigned and directed this research as part of her larger investigation of Velázquez's Portrait of Mother Jerónima de la Fuente. My responsibilities included providing critiques of books and articles related to the painting's critical context and formulating an in-depth research paper and presentation. My understanding of the portrait itself depends largely on Tanya J. Tiffany, "Gender and Holiness in Velázquez's Mother Jerónima de la Fuente," presented at the Congress of the Society for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies, Los Angeles, April 2004."

[2] This description depends largely on Jonathan Brown, Velázquez: Painter and Courtier (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 32-34; I have also used Tiffany, "Gender and Holiness."

role as missionary in the Philippines. The symbols, texts, and the analysis of the painting predetermined the themes of penance, convent art, and colonization.

Over the course of my research, however, I explored other themes related to *Mother Jerónima*, which arose frequently in the literature; for instance, misogyny in Spanish and religious culture, "virility" amongst female spiritual leaders, and eroticism in nuns' relationship with Christ. The research for this study consisted of an in-depth literature review of each of these issues. Primarily, I read and evaluated secondary sources that pertain to each issue. I began this process was initiated by reading texts directly related to the painting, and then deriving from those bibliographies texts that concern the issues at hand. Most of these materials were published works by historians and art historians, which I located through library research. However, I also received literature from the convent itself. For each work, I analyzed the text's arguments and relevance to the painting in a detailed abstract and developed a bibliography of related works. In particular, I strove to identify the primary sources that informed the text. By focusing on primary sources, I can consider the painting's issues in their own specific historical context and avoid analysis and argumentation that is influenced by a contemporary perspective. From here, I considered how the issue, and the primary and secondary sources supporting it, shed light on the painting. In the end, I read and evaluated twelve pieces of literature for this study, with approximately three works related to each theme.

Mother Jerónima de la Asunción was called to the spiritual life at a young age, after reading a biography of Saint Clare. In 1569, she met Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the renowned reformer of the Carmelite Order, who was establishing a Carmelite monastery in Toledo at the time. In 1570, she entered the Franciscan convent of Santa Isabel at the age of 15 and stayed until 1620. In 1598, she began to strive, against much opposition, to become the abbess of the convent of Santa Clara in Manila, "the first of its kind in the Far East and Oceania."[3] She was finally honored the position in 1619 and became the first female missionary in the Far East.[4] Mother Jerónima's reputation of extreme devotion manifested in her acts of physical mortification. In order to uphold her practice of silence, she used "hand signals"[5] and kept stones in her mouth to prevent speaking. She also fasted frequently, wore a crown of thorns and a wire shirt under her habit, performed self-flagellation, fastened her rope belt tightly enough to chafe away pieces of her skin, changed her clothing so rarely to avoid interaction with her own body that "worms and other filthy creatures would

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[3]Pedro Ruano, O.F.M., Vice General-Postulator, Santa Clara Monastery, Manila, Philippines, *Venerable Mother Jerónima de la Asunción (1555-1630): Foundress of Santa Clara Monastery*.

[4] See Ruano; Lilian Zirpolo, "*Madre Jerónima de la Fuente* and *Lady with a Fan*: Two Portraits by Velázquez Reexamined," *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/Summer 1994) pp 16-21.

[5] Zirpolo.

emerge from her rotting garments," and hung herself on a cross in sympathy of Christ's bodily suffering.[6]

Arduous as Jerónima's life was, in the context of gender roles in seventeenth-century Spain, the country's Golden Age, spiritual life was actually a refuge from the misogynistic attitude of society. In her article, "*Madre Jerónima de la Fuente* and *Lady with a Fan*: Two Portraits by Velázquez Reexamined," Lilian Zirpolo discusses the reflection of this chauvinism in numerous primary sources.[7] Literature by Fray Martín de Córdoba from the 15th-century asserted that women's main purpose was to procreate. Instructions on model behavior for women were common literary works. These included Francisco de Quevedo's *Capitulaciones Matrimoniales* (Marital Capitulations) (1599), Vicente Mexía's *Saludable Instrucción del Estado del Matrimonio* (Healthy Instructions on the State of Matrimony) (1566), Juan Luis de Vives' *Instrucción de la Mujer Cristiana* (Instruction of the Christian Woman) (1528), and Fray Luis de León's *La Perfecta Casada* (The Perfect Wife). Baltasar Gracián may have expressed the era's attitudes toward women in his *El Criticón* (The Criticizer) (1651), where he wrote that woman had released the world's ills and, in being the first to meet with them, she was "saturated with evil from head to toe." Zirpolo contends that the path of chastity allowed women an education, which was only afforded to noble women, and a means to avoid arranged marriage and the dangers of childbirth.

Though advantageous as it was in many ways, the life of religious women was rife with misogyny and subordination from within the church, as well. In her article, "Subversion, and Seduction: Perceptions of the Body in Writings of Religious Women in Counter-Reformation Spain," Mary Elizabeth Perry discusses the lives and writings of three Sevillian nuns whose subversive behavior empowered them in the face of a (sometimes sexually) dominant male church.[8] Despite financial difficulty in the convents and oppression from all around, including from *devotos* (men outside the church who worshipped nuns) and their own confessors, nuns empowered themselves through enclosure, chastity, and the legacies of the female spiritual leaders before them. The nuns discussed in the article demonstrate subversion in various ways: the religious writings against a dominant confessor, executed in confinement by María de San José, the first prioress of a Carmelite convent; the active spiritual work of Ana de Jesús, which subverted the power of priests; and the lyrical poetry of Gregoria Francisca de Santa Teresa.

In her book, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Alison Weber also discusses the misogynistic attitude of the Church.[9] Both Weber's and Zirpolos' works shed light on the situation and the power struggle religious women faced during this time period in Spain. Additionally, Weber emphasizes

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[6] Tiffany 6-7; and Zirpolo.
[7] Zirpolo.
[8] Alain Saint-Saëns, ed., *Religion, Body, and Gender in Early Modern Spain*, (Mellen University: Lewiston, New York, 1991).
[9] Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1990).

the influence of St. Teresa of Avila, Jerónima's own inspiration and exemplar, in her writings and actions. The author explains that St. Paul had prohibited women's teachings. In addition, Melchor Cano, a sixteenth-century theologian, condemned others for "trusting the Scriptures to women: the divine word is a man's issue, 'like arms and money.'"[10] For her own survival, Teresa wrote with a self-depreciating humility, or "rhetoric of feminity," which she understood as how society perceived women's language. Indeed, Teresa altered her style and language in response to the repressive circumstances of the Inquisition.

The topic of subversion in the writings of nuns is also discussed in Electa Arenal's and Stacey Schlau's *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*.[11] In the preface of this book, we learn that prior to the twentieth century, there were two female writers in the Hispanic literary canon that were widely recognized, and both were nuns. These two women were Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The authors examine the writings of religious women in order to expose examples of subversion and demonstrate their "participation in early modern discourse," which had previously been dismissed as "otherly."[12] While this material looks at subversion through the medium of writing, *Untold Sisters* is critical in discussing the rebellious nature of Golden Age Spanish nuns.

Because nuns did not partake in public activities, they produced much writing between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, which commonly dealt with inner religious experiences. St. Teresa's writings reflected a profound "understanding of the history, psychology, literature, spirituality, and sexual politics of the period," while Sor Juana's work reflected an "interdisciplinary inquiry."[13] In their writings, nuns presented their thoughts as praise of God and the Church, however, also distinctly apparent are the expression of individuality, imagination, and emotion, and insight into their daily lives and relationships with the women in their community. Indeed, the nuns' works are nearly the only glimpse of early modern Hispanic women's consciousness we have.

Monasticism, which Arenal and Schlau define as "an ascetic mode of life secluded from the world... in order to achieve perfection in the love of God," can be either eremitical (solitary) or cenobitical (family).[14] Though the number of monasteries of men declined beginning in the fourteenth century, the cloister became more and more of a refuge for women, especially noble daughters seeking to escape marriage. In many ways, the cenobitical environment of the convent met the psychological needs these women could not find at home by providing them with a divine family of women. There, nuns had full control of every aspect of their lives and commanded respect from the secular world. Though they were afforded the only education deemed acceptable for women, it was limited even in the convent. Book learning was prohibited, and written

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[10] Ibid. 31.
[11] Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, trans. Amanda Powell, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 1989).
[12] Ibid. ix.
[13] Ibid. 2.
[14] Ibid. 3.

expression was a rare privilege. When the opportunity was available, nuns used it to influence the thoughts and minds of the other women for whom they were writing, and to criticize the pedantry they frequently encountered.

At a time when "religious fervor was official government policy" due to Charles V's reforms to the Church in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (the assembly that inaugurated the Catholic Reformation) denigrated the participation of women in social discourse.[15] Out of fear of the Council and Inquisition, writers developed a "verbal camouflage" for their dissidence.[16] For instance, by taking an extremely orthodox position of utter obedience to God and the Church in her writings, Teresa subtly employed a combination of submission and subversion to criticize hypocrisies and unrestraint in the Church.

The explicitly erotic language of these writings reflects the role of Christ's Bride, which nuns take on by profession. For example, the Flemish sister Hadewijch claimed to experience Christ "mouth on mouth, body on body" as "the experience of orgasm."[17] Madre Castillo of Colombia claimed that "one night I seemed to see Him naked and kneeling on the Cross, and a light wisp of a cloud spiraled upwards, and wrapped itself around His body; and my soul, melting with love for its Lord, understood it was that cloud."[18] Arenal and Schlau assert that this appeal to "erotic domination" follows from "a desire for autonomy and acknowledgement."[19] The domestic and maternal virtues of obedience and humility came out of this sexual freedom. The authors relate this sensuality of language and relationship to Christ to practices of self-mortification, which were the only opportunities religious women had to experience and stimulate their bodies. In fact, members of the Carmelite Order debated whether extreme penitential activities or inner spirituality was most demonstrative of piety.

Indeed, the penitential activities of Mother Jerónima and religious women were also reflective of subversion. In her book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the physical acts of devotion by women and their significance.[20] However, Bynum concentrates on religious women of the Low Countries, France, Germany, and Italy in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, her text is exceptional in its examination of the treatment of the body in terms of gender and subversion. According to Bynum, female ascetics were far more engrossed in the bodily aspects of Christ and his suffering than their male counterparts. She cites quantitative evidence, as well as iconographic and literary evidence, supporting the fact that all penitential asceticism was significantly more common in religious

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[15] Ibid. 6.
[16] Ibid. 8.
[17] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (University of California: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), p. 247.
[18] Arenal and Schlau 12.
[19] Ibid. 12.
[20] Bynum.

women than men.[21] Though the Desert Fathers exhibited this same degree of mortification, contemporary priests and male saints were more interested in the other aspects of asceticism.

The concept of the female body was often entangled with that of the willful mind and spirit. Arenal and Schlau argue that chastity actually allowed women to overcome weak mind and flesh to reach certain "virility."[22] In her text, Weber discusses Teresa's description in countless sources as a "virile woman."[23] Indeed, Jerónima was also regarded as a "*mujer varonil*—a term referring to women of exceptional fortitude."[24] Tiffany discusses Velázquez's portrait in light of this concept; she points to the inscription and Jerónima's direct gaze as evidence of the artist capturing the concept of *mujer varonil.* Unlike Arenal and Schlau, however, Weber contends that ascribing masculine attributes to religious women was the only way a misogynistic society could deem them worthy. Bynum further explains that male hagiographers often described women as "virile," yet "women's most elaborate self-images were either female or androgynous."[25]

It was widely believed that woman's relationship to matter, hence the body, was analogous to man's relationship with spirit. There are several complex reasons for this. The most obvious reason is that the female body was seen by both sexes as fleshly, worldly, and remote from spirituality in its sensuality. Women interpreted this characteristic as a likeness to Christ's body in its suffering. Moreover, Christ's humanity was considered female because it comes from Mary; she is the source of Christ's physicality.

In addition, women were not considered able to control their own destinies. As religious men were able to renounce things such as wealth and property, women had no authority over major aspects of their lives and thus could not make such grandiose gestures. They were, for the most part, only in control of their own bodies, which they manipulated as a means to control the self (through fasting, flagellation) and their situation. Bynum, therefore, disputes the contention that self-inflicted acts of masochism were manifestations of an internalization of misogyny and victimization. Rather, religious women used their own bodies to rebel against the implications that women were to be dominated and domesticated in life. These results equate to the subversion of male authority in the church, as extreme physical asceticism allowed religious women to offer an alternative model of spiritual life that rejects the moderation purported by male theologians throughout time and, more importantly, the ability to access God in a very direct way.

This access to God is central to the idea that instruments of mortification—whipping, wearing the crown of thorns, suspension from the cross, and fasting—were forms of *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ's suffering). For women, pain became means to pleasure, and agony was their salvation. The medieval period

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[21] Ibid. 76.
[22] Arenal and Schlau 12.
[23] Weber 17.
[24] Tiffany 9.
[25] Bynum 28.

before Jerónima's time (1200-1500) places a considerable emphasis on Christ's bodiliness and humanity. Thomas Aquinas asserted, at this time, that the self *is* the body and not just a soul in the shell of a body. By the fourteenth-century, the idea of Christ's humanity manifested more and more in literal acts of imitation of the cross. Religious women would often interpret this sensual relationship with Christ as erotic and marital. Painful as it was, this sensuality and sexuality was rife with elements of terror and joy.

This relationship with Christ as both an erotic and ideal image is explored in Mindy Nancarrow Taggard's article, "Picturing Intimacy in a Spanish Golden Age Convent.[26] The article examines five paintings attributed to the sixteenth-century Carmelite nun, Cecilia del Nacimiento (1570-1646). In her examination, Taggard asserts that the unorthodox images of Christ in these paintings were a validation and consoling companion for these nuns. At this time, the standardized image of Christ, usually painted by men, was depicted as a muscular and masculine ideal. In these five works, however, Christ is depicted as soft, weak, and feminine, a reflection of them, thereby justifying them after being often dismissed by the patriarchal church. This weak, fleshly body also signified Christ's humanity. This dimension of the imagery corresponds to the concept that "Christ's spirit came from God and his body came from Mary," which further bolsters the female identification of Christ's flesh. On the other hand, Christ is also depicted as seductive and virile. For example, the mutual sidelong glance and apparent erection in *Christ at the Column* reflect the painting's function as providing the nuns with their absent Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. Instead of aspiring to an ideal, the nuns sought "fusion with the ideal man." Another function of the paintings relates to Saint Teresa of Avila. The paintings were a visual interpretation of a female prayer, which she describes for the nuns in her writings. The images were meant to inspire the nuns into concentrated meditation, which they often supplemented with instruments of mortification. They also represented her visionary knowledge of Christ, which challenged the solely Scriptural knowledge of male theologians. After Teresa's death the paintings served to unite the nuns in her memory when the order was split by reform.

In his book, *Nuns As Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, Jeffrey Hamburger also discusses the role of art in convents.[27] However, both Taggard and Hamburger deal with convent art that is actually made by nuns themselves. Moreover, Hamburger's concentration lies with medieval German art by nuns, and he spends much of the book analyzing the recurrent symbols of the rose and the heart.[28] Regardless, both these texts discuss in great detail the

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[26] Mindy Nancarrow Taggard, "Picturing Intimacy in a Spanish Golden Age Convent" (*Oxford Art Journal*, v. 23, 2000) p. 97-112.

[27] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997).

[28] Both the rose and heart symbolism are associated with nuns' marriage and romantic/erotic relationship with Christ. The heart is also associated with the sacrament of Eucharist.

role that art played for these cloistered women, who made it an essential part of their spirituality. Previously, the history of female monastic art was largely disregarded in the discourse of greater art history. The meditative subjects discussed in the text reflect the disconnection of the cloister from the secular world. They also address the entire community, as private ownership was prohibited, and art was, thus, common property in the abbey.

Hamburger mentions three main purposes of art in convents: to supplement prayer, as *imitatio Christi*, and to provide an ideal to which the nuns should aspire. This first function is related to art's role as a means for contemplative experience. Meditation on the art was itself considered an act of devotion in that it both "supplemented devotional texts," and provided "access to the divine."[29]

This second function is intrinsically linked to the first. As a part of prayer, nuns were to imitate Christ physically as well as spiritually. Hamburger cites the primary source *Vita Jesu Christi* by Ludolf Saxony, which instructed the nuns to prostrate themselves in three different postures in order to reflect the *imitatio Christi* with the body. This type of prayer and exercise, described in numerous medieval literary works, were in essence reenactments of Christ's Passion. Indeed, physical suffering was often interpreted in convents as expressions of the key virtues of patience and obedience. Like Jerónima, the late thirteenth-century Cistercian Lukardis Oberweimar practiced hanging herself on the cross in imitation of Christ's death, and the late fourteenth-century hermit Dorothy of Montau stood for hours with her arms raised or nailed herself onto the wall to reenact Christ's agony. Unsurprisingly, these acts of imitation were commonly inspired by images of Crucifixions within the convent. Religious authorities, however, denounced "what they regarded as the nuns' extravagant, even excessive, acts of self-mortification in imitation of the Passion."[30]

Finally, the third function of the ideal or exemplar is, in turn, related to this second function of *imitatio Christi*. Ludolf Saxony's stipulations of physical prayer were to make the nun's piety visible in order to become an exemplar for others. Fourteenth-century mystic Henry Suso, in his book *The Exemplar*, described his "athletic asceticism" as imitations of Christ so that he represented himself as a physical and spiritual exemplar for the nuns who read his work.[31] Yet, again, Suso responds to the criticism of female asceticism by cautiously castigating himself in his writings for such penances.

In his discussion of nuns' compassion (which he points out literally means "suffering with") displayed on the cross in *imitatio Christi*, Hamburger contends "the path that led the devotee toward the summit of mystical experience required that she first descend with Christ to the depths of degradation."[32] He refers to a drawing that depicts a nun with a flail and scourge to point out that the nun was

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[29] Hamburger 61.
[30] Ibid. 93.
[31] Ibid. 65.
[32] Ibid. 101.

and is the epitome of piety.[33] The cross is a symbol whose arms each signified virtues personified by Jesus and is the symbolic and literal "crux" of the universe. Hence, in *Mother Jerónima*, the Crucifix in her hand is the most apposite symbol of her penitential acts of self-mortification, her compassion for Christ and *imitatio Christi*, and ultimately her tremendous piety. These attributes would have made her portrait an example of this third function of the ideal; it was an image that was meant to actuate and challenge the audience of her peers.

As to Jerónima's role as missionary in the Philippines,Vicente L. Rafael's book, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*, examines the Spanish colonization of the Tagalogs (the Philippines' dominant ethno-linguistic group).[34] This book centers on the role of language in the process of conversion, and focuses on male Jesuit missionaries. Yet it reveals some insight into Jerónima's situation in the Philippines as an agent of conversion. The author points out that the evangelization of Tagalogs is intrinsically linked to colonization and is its most important dimension. He goes on to state that the Spanish missionary was the most powerful agent of colonial rule and an integral part of the Spanish bureaucracy. This owes to the fact that the king (and of course the missionary) derived his rule from God's rule. In fact, in Spain's conquests of the New World, imperial authority was secondary and supplementary to the goal of evangelization.

He explains the role of language in the submission of the Tagalogs. Missionaries did preach in the native language, but only after derivation from Latin through the medium of Castilian. Rafael cites Filipino writer and nationalist José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* to point out that the Spanish priests gave sermons first in Castilian then in Tagalog.[35] However, the Tagalogs never truly became bilingual. For this reason, Rafael asserts that colonial order in the Philippines was based on mutual misreadings of language. Despite, and perhaps because of this misunderstanding and inability to dominate Tagalog vernacular, colonization and Christianization occurred rapidly—with fewer than three hundred missionaries, the Spanish had converted over five hundred thousand Filipinos by the first half of the seventeenth century.

Furthermore, the reorganization of territories into divisions centered on the church and the rearranging of hierarchy in Tagalog class structure by the colonizers also facilitated submission to authority. The rearranging was based

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[33] Ibid. 112, Fig. 73. *Der Weg sur Seligkeit,* Augsburg, ca. 1490, Mains, Gutenberg-Museum, Inv. Nr. 18: 4°/500.

[34] Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (Cornell University: Ithaca, New York, 1988).

[35] Ruano also states, "It will be recalled too that Dr. José P. Rizal's novel, *Noli Me Tangere*, immortalized the Sta. Clara monastery in Intramuros as the final end of its novel's heroine, Maria Clara"; José Rizal, *The Lost Eden (Noli Me Tangere)*, trans. and intro. León Ma. Guerrero, foreword by James A. Michener (Greenwood Press: New York, 1968.)

on existing systems of slavery and servitude, which is tied to the Tagalog concept of indebtedness and allowed for an unproblematic transition into a system of patronage. The missionaries believed Christianity was a gift they were bestowing upon the natives and so deemed themselves benevolent protector. Because of this, they expected the natives to submit to the king, his representatives, and God. This submission was in the form of the tribute, forced payment to the church in exchange for Christian doctrine, which was central to Spanish authority. Later, the natives became a more integral support to the clergy through confraternities (as native clergy was prevented by Spanish legislation and racism), which guarded against the Filipinos' tendency to fall back into "paganism."

In sum, Velázquez portrays a woman religious who is truly a product of the force of the Catholic Church in Golden Age Spain. Ironically, spiritual women like Jerónima were utilizing the oppressive force of the Church to make their voices heard. In the face of misogynistic attitudes from society, male religious leaders, and the Inquisition, cloistered women found access to education, influence through literature and art, and direct contact with God. These endeavors reflect the subversion of authority by religious women. In Jerónima case, this subversion culminates in an impression of virility, which follows from the model of St. Teresa of Avila. Jerónima's subversion and divine experience are manifested in her penitential activities of self-mortification, which were prevalent in specifically female spirituality. Jerónima's compassion (or suffering) for Christ is revealed in her acts of *imitatio Christi* and is suggested by the cross she holds in the painting, the text in the inscription and the ribbon streaming from her mouth. Jerónima's evident devotion and strength of will are described pictorially and in the inscription to inspire and stimulate her sisters into meditation and action. Ultimately, Jerónima's portrait functioned as an ideal in the convent to which the other nuns were to strive. Additionally, the portrait memorializes Jerónima's travel to the Philippines as a missionary and, in effect, colonizer.