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### Cecilia del Nacimiento. Journeys of a Mystic Soul in Poetry and Prose. Intro. and prose trans. Kevin Donnelly. Poetry trans. Sandra Sider

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different ways of understanding Shakespeare, the roundtable mainly becomes four discrete and cursory takes on three different plays. While there is a degree of interchange towards the end, and even some lively disagreement, the discussion fails to reach the full potential offered by such a meeting of minds. Given the need for deeper and fuller dialogue, this roundtable is a substantial disappointment.

However, the editors are more than astute enough to understand and remark on all the issues I have been raising: the inevitable repeated turn to certain plays; the substantial body of work already covering this field and its complexity; the difficulty of thinking and speaking outside disciplinary restraints; the multiplicity of possible approaches and the impossibility of comprehensiveness or definitiveness; the judiciousness of ending with questions rather than answers. As a consequence, anyone looking for a single volume to introduce them to Shakespeare and the law might rewardingly and aptly be steered to this work. The contributions are high quality, the questions asked are important. All who work in this field benefit from being prodded and inspired, here and elsewhere, to continue thinking about them.

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### **Cecilia del Nacimiento.**

***Journeys of a Mystic Soul in Poetry and Prose.* Intro. and prose trans. Kevin Donnelly. Poetry trans. Sandra Sider.**

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Toronto Series 18. Toronto: Iter Inc. / Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012. Pp. xi, 548. ISBN 978-0-7727-2118-1 (paperback) \$37.

This volume, which offers an English translation of prose compositions and a bilingual selection of poems by the Spanish mystic Cecilia del Nacimiento, is a welcome addition to the series The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe. Cecilia (1570–1646) was the daughter of Antonio Sobrino, the secretary of the University of Valladolid, and Cecilia Morillas, a noted translator and artist of illuminated manuscripts. Cecilia and her sister, María, received an exceptional education for girls of their day: they studied painting, music, Latin, French,

geography, and embroidery under their mother's tutelage. In 1588 Cecilia entered the Discalced Carmelite convent in her natal city, adopting Cecilia del Nacimiento as her name in religion. In the following years, she produced a substantial body of mystical poetry and theological prose. In fact, she became one of the most prolific daughters of the Discalced Carmelite founder Teresa of Avila (1515–82). Comparisons between Teresa's and Cecilia's prose are inevitable. Teresa famously was said to "speak through writing." Indeed, her prose is characterized by loose syntax, ambling parentheses, diminutives, and other markers of oral discourse. In contrast, Cecilia, an accomplished Latinist, wrote in polished, lucid Castilian (ably translated here by Kevin Donnelly). Like much of women's monastic literature, Cecilia's writings remained unpublished in convent archives until the twentieth century.

Cecilia clearly had access to unpublished poetry of John of the Cross, and his influence is striking, but she also unfortunately suffers from comparison with the Carmelite friar, one of the strongest poets in the Spanish language. For both poets, mystical union is described as an amorous encounter with the beloved. But whereas John's poetry can be read as secular love poetry (which is metaphorical and only implicitly allegorical), Cecilia's poems make explicit the allegorical signified. Although her poetry lacks the sustained mystery and intensity of John's, she nevertheless is capable of moments of lyrical eroticism. One example, from "En medio de un silencio sin sonido" ("In the Midst of Silence without Sound"), must suffice: "En brazos de una Virgen reclinado / porque descubre ya su amor ardiente, / que el fuego que tenía represado / no pudo ya un momento denterarse" ("Reclined in the arms of a Virgin / now he discovers her ardent love, / for the fire that she was repressing / not a moment more could be restrained" ) (434–35). The selections chosen for translation by Sandra Sider—dedicatory sonnets, *liras*, and adaptations *a lo divino* (in a religious key) of ballads, lullabies, and love songs—illustrate Cecilia's poetic range and mastery of diverse metrical forms.

Readers familiar with Teresa of Avila's trials as a spiritual pedagogue will be surprised by the notable freedom with which Cecilia engaged in theological discourse. Teresa wrote during a period when the Spanish Church interpreted the Pauline dictum, that women remain silent in the churches, very broadly. When Teresa did make theological statements, she hedged them with declarations that she was only "writing from obedience" or offering practical advice for cloistered nuns. When, in the late 1560s, she composed a fragmentary exegesis

of several verses from the Song of Songs (which was, in effect, a defense of a woman's right to enjoy and receive consolation from this biblical text), she described it as "a poor little gift" for the nuns of her convent. When her Dominican confessor subsequently ordered her to burn the manuscript, Teresa promptly obeyed. We know the text today because of copies that her nuns had hidden away. In contrast, Cecilia was the author of a theological exegesis in support of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception, a fiercely debated topic that was not accepted as dogma until the nineteenth century. She also wrote a number of glosses on verses from Song of Songs at the request of her spiritual director, in addition to a play in verse based on this text to be performed on the occasion of religious professions. Why wasn't Cecilia ordered to burn her manuscripts? Why didn't she run afoul of the Inquisition? For one thing, as Donnelly explains in his introduction, Cecilia always recognized the church's role in the realization of the mystical bond. She also enjoyed the unqualified support of Tomás de Jesús, a high-ranking Carmelite prelate and her spiritual director for many years. She undoubtedly benefitted from the protection of her influential brothers: Francisco became bishop of Valladolid, José was chaplain to the royal family, and her occasional collaborator, Antonio, was a well-regarded court preacher and theologian. The only time her writings were confiscated was in 1612—and this was because Tomás de Jesús had run afoul of Carmelite superiors. Cecilia's manuscripts were returned a few years later. Cecilia's relative freedom to write on theologically controversial subjects was also probably due to Teresa's rapid advance to the altars (she was beatified in 1614 and canonized in 1622). In other words, glossing the Song of Songs in 1568 and 1612 were very different communicative acts. Biblical exegesis might not have been an obvious career choice for a nun in the seventeenth century, but for someone with good connections—and the monastic daughter of the soon-to-be Saint Teresa of Avila—it was not necessarily subversive. These differences are instructive. Thanks to the editors of this volume and the unflagging efforts of the senior editors of *The Other Voice* series, we have the opportunity to continue to historicize, refine, and modulate our understanding of women's agency and social integration in early modern Europe.

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