

Speak in Silence: The Power of Weakness in the Works of Teresa de Cartagena

Elena Deanda
(Washington College)

Teresa de Cartagena (ca. 1424) was a deaf nun who dared to ‘speak’ about disability, God, and the right of women to write in medieval Spain. Cartagena’s *Grove of the Infirm* and *Wonder at the Works of God* (ca. 1450-1476) use a discourse on marginalization in order to insert normally excluded groups into the hegemonic written world.¹ While *Grove* is a manifesto for all the disabled and sick, *Wonder* legitimizes the right of women to write. For medieval infirm and women, Cartagena thus becomes the ultimate spokesperson. Because she was a deaf nun, both Cartagena’s life and her body were subjected to enclosure and silence. Furthermore, she was a *conversa* (the granddaughter of a Jew converted to Christianity) in the midst of Spain’s political campaign to ‘purify’ all blood (and beliefs) through expulsion or death. Although she belonged to a prominent family who blended seamlessly under the new conditions of the Christian monarchy, her works continuously stressed a politics of identity that focus on the outcast and the acceptance of the other.² Yet, they cannot escape to be shaped by the privileged status of their writer.

An analysis of Teresa de Cartagena’s works unveils not only the self-empowerment strategies of a woman writer (v.gr. deriving strength from the presupposed female weakness) but also shows how difficult is for scholars to categorize writers broadly as feminists without taking into account all the paradoxes of exclusion and inclusion, of silence and speech, of subalternity and exceptionalism that intersect the myriad of identities of a text and of an individual. Contemporary readings of Cartagena have stressed her radical politics of identity focusing on how she asserted herself as a woman writer before Teresa de Ávila (1515-1582) or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695). María del Mar Cortés Mortimer recognizes that Cartagena inaugurated a discourse on the defense of women writers in peninsular literature in the same way as two centuries later, the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz did in Latin American literature (379). Mary Baldrige has thus considered her the “earliest feminist writer in Spain” (55-72).

Ronald Surtz, however, has noted that “she never advocates for female education or suggests that any woman is authorized to write a treatise” (204). Although Surtz does

¹ The exact date of the treatise is unstable. Lewis Hutton said that *Grove* was written by 1450 (280). Carmen García says that it was written in 1460 (152). Dayle Seidenspinner and Yonsoo Kim agreed that it was written between 1475 and 1476 (140).

² Cartagena’s family of *conversos* occupied important positions in the Church and the Spanish courts of Aragon and Castile during the XV century. Her grandfather, the ex-rabbi of Burgos, Selomo Ha-Levi (1350-1435) was baptized in 1390 with his family and took the name of Pablo de Santa María because the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to him. Soon after, he became the bishop of Cartagena and Burgos and was credited with the conversion of 40,000 Jews, which exemplifies how much he desired to conform to his new status. Two of his sons were bishops of Plasencia, Palencia, and Burgos, as well as professors in the University of Salamanca and prominent writers. Alonso de Cartagena, Teresa’s uncle, was one of the most prolific writers in late medieval Spain and shared with her an intense love for Humanism as well as a keen interest to defend the female gender in his treatise *The Book of Illustrious Women*, which is lost (Seidenspinner 4,5; Barberet 203).

not abound in this particular issue, his argument points to the fact that seeing Cartagena's politics of difference as a totalizing project that defends all women, or all types of Otherness, may overlook the fact that her privileged position in society—her class—determined the borders of the group that she represented and those whom she invoked and addressed. By speaking on behalf of God, by defining audiences, and strategically aligning herself with established powers Teresa befits hegemony paradoxically through a discourse on weakness.

When analyzing her self-assertion in the text, it becomes evident that her discourse on marginalization colludes with power by using God as the ultimate power itself. In *Grove of the Infirm*, Cartagena uses weakness as her major strength and addresses the weak to lecture the stronger. In *Wonder at the Works of God*, she shifts her audience, defends her writing from the bad reception given by her (male) contemporaries, reinforces her alliances with a strong privileged female network, and builds the most ancient defense of a woman writer in Spanish literature. In both *Grove* and *Wonder* Cartagena inhabits the intimate and private as launching sites to meet her public and she moves from particularism to universalism and back by expanding or narrowing the group she addresses and leads. Furthermore, we can consider the weak and deaf person that is Cartagena as the ultimate leader, a leader who establishes strategic alliances yet keeps an exceptional and representative status.

Grove of the Infirm is an account of Cartagena's experience with deafness and a defense of disabled people as they are seen by society at large. This text is deeply autobiographical and mediated by Cartagena's body, yet there is little or nothing that we know about her disability from it. According to the latest discoveries made by Dayle Seidenspinner and Yonsoo Kim, Cartagena had hearing deficiencies since a young age and her gradual deafness forced her family to confine her in a convent (first Santa Clara of Burgos and later Las Huelgas), where she gradually lost all sense of hearing.³

In *Grove*, she declares her malaise when, because of her deafness, her family got rid of her, "even if one is the son of a duke, an admiral, or a marquis, if he is afflicted with great suffering... his own father and mother will dispatch him quickly from their house and put him where he can cause them no detriment or disorder" (59). Although Cartagena will portray her deafness as a divine blessing, and despite the fact that Denise Barberet or María Rivera Garretas have considered this treatise an account of how she "came to terms with it" or how she "embraced" her disease, the bitterness that she expresses repeatedly against her family and her handicap shows that, on the contrary, *Grove of the Infirm* is Cartagena's failed attempt to fully come to terms with her disability (Barberet 4, Rivera "Teresa" 758).

In *Grove*, deafness is both a blessing and a curse. And God is also a Janus-like figure since he bestows deafness upon her with a divine plan. God is thus portrayed as both the forceful father from the Old Testament as well as the loving and caring Jesus from the New. In this respect, Cartagena seems to pay homage to her Judaic (*conversa*) tradition—and especially to the Book of Job, which is a severe attack against God's will

³ Based in two recently discovered documents, Seidenspinner and Kim consider that she fell deaf in her late twenties, that is, between 1453 and 1459 (133-40). Then she entered in the Franciscan Monastery of Burgos in 1440 and because of her uncle Alonso (who wanted to protect her from the Franciscan agenda against *conversos* as well as to promote her socially) she was transferred in 1449 to the Cistercian Monastery of Huelgas, which was more prestigious, thus more akin to her social rank (135-139).

that is ultimately resolved with divine intervention. In *Grove*, God is a “discreet man” who asks people to “listen by force” and to “fear and obey” (26). It is a God both honored and abhorred.⁴ Nonetheless, all His actions—even those which are hurtful, she says—belong to His master plan: “Thus the hand of God signaled me to be quite and cease worldly chatter. And I silenced by force, did not willingly listen to what I should hear, rather, burdened with my foolishness, I struggled further my own harm. And merciful God added a second sign with His Finger to His Lips, clearly indicating that it is not His will that I speak of things of this world but that I be completely silent” (27). Cartagena did not even have to obey God; He forcefully silenced her, and although she resisted and struggled, the action escaped her free will. Like in the *Book of Job*, God’s mandate was unavoidable. Without entirely arguing that she is a mystic, Cartagena narrates the moment in which she was enlightened by God to endure a silence that will fit her health.⁵ This semi-mystical moment serves Teresa as a strategy to legitimize her writing practice with divine authority since, as Barbara Newman has stated, “medieval women having neither the right nor the ability to speak for themselves, had by necessity to speak for God. Or... God chose to speak through them so that men... were compelled to listen” (133). God’s imposed silence forces her to withdraw from the world in order to achieve a spiritual *ataraxia*, and, at the same time, it makes her to redraw her own vision of the world and her own position within that world.⁶

Although Cartagena’s defense of deafness and silence seems to comply with a divine purpose, it also allows her to achieve a goal far more mundane: writing, in order to teach God’s wonders but more importantly in order to teach herself how to reflect on these wonders: how to write, how to think, how to interact with the public. Joan Cammarata has considered Teresa de Cartagena’s illness as a “catalyst for the creative process,” and we can add that beyond the creative process, deafness is her gateway to vanquish her physical and social isolations (42). It is an instrument to assert herself as a rational being and a strategy to legitimately enter the public sphere.

There is something paradoxical in the idea of a deaf writer and next to this paradox, Cartagena’s writings expose another one: the fact that a defense of contemplative (silent) life needs public discourse. Regarding this paradox, we see that Cartagena views silence as necessary to being a more spiritual person since noises or conversations are distractions for the soul: “it is imperative that we withdraw ourselves and our will completely if we want to listen without hindrance or noise to what is so fitting to our health” (28). Yet her defense of silence is an oxymoron since contemplative

⁴ Cartagena’s vision of paternity in *Grove* is primarily negative. Moreover, Cartagena equals fatherhood and ‘bad desire’ when she says that just as “the father is the beginning and the engenderer of his children, so bad desire is the beginning and the engenderer of sins” (32). Cartagena’s father (who was the third son of Pablo de Santa María, a member of the council of Burgos, the guardian of Juan II, and an advisor of the Catholic monarchs, Fernando and Isabel) was thrice married, fathered 10 children, and had three illegitimate sons, conditions that may explain her ill predisposition towards him and overall towards the father figure.

⁵ Although critics such as Allison Riley have stressed that Teresa considers herself a sort of saint that wrote her own hagiography, in *Grove* she does not make a claim to be a mystic but a secular chosen (36). She never shows signs of being raptured or in spiritual ecstasies. Barberet, for example, considers that Cartagena did not want to be a “passive instrument of a higher power” but instead “an individual drive to reveal her own truth” (215).

⁶ Gregorio Rodríguez mentions that it is only through the use of force (and not of reason) that her soul can end in this state of ‘ataraxia’ (369).

practice promoted the benefits of retiring the self from the world only through public speech. In other words, a demand for silence becomes a speech act.

Through the means of writing, Cartagena's physical withdrawal from the world met her will to interact with it. Writing thus became the final bridge that canceled the physical gap between her and her audience. Her prominent agenda on silence is thus rhetorical because the silence that she defends so dearly is occupied with the inner sound of her writing. This contradiction inhabits *Grove* when she says that God has "removed completely my desire [of communicating]" yet she is "desirous of revealing to those who want to know what is revealed in me so that as I know it, all may know it" (28, 25). All and all, Cartagena's struggle between the need to be alone and the need to communicate is a paradox that also exemplifies the universal acts of both reading and writing.

Writing (and not God) is what truly allows Cartagena to cope with her disability. If deafness is a crucifixion, writing is her resurrection, as she expresses in the following passage: "What I used to call my crucifixion, I now call my resurrection. Now are my two enemies reconciled, my desire and my suffering... For you not only cut me off from the dangerous mob of worldly distractions but you have removed from me my desire... sparing me a lengthy battle between those two enemies, which are my wanting and my not being able" (29). Although what she says is that 'having known' God's intentions is what have brought resolution to her suffering, we can read how it is the written word what truly reconciles her wanting (to speak) and her not being able (her deafness and muteness). The Verb rescues Cartagena from her infirmity. Writing is the grove that comforts her and the space of solace that she wants to share with others: "A gracious grove under whose shade my body could rest and my spirit receive a healthful breeze" (24). The grove is not God, it is a community of voices, of books. It is the space in which her own voice and her own book echo.

In Cartagena's case, writing is, according to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, a *prosthesis* that allows her to enter that world that has been physically negated to her. Writing disguises her disability, de-emphasizes her difference, and removes her from her discomfort. Writing makes Cartagena feel empowered to face the historical refusal for her corporeal deviance and brings the unruliness of both her body and the world under her control. The written word, Mitchell and Snyder say, maintains a prosthetic relation with an exterior that the speaker cannot possess or embody and returns to him/her with a sense of possession of this outside world. The *prosthetic narrative* provides the unruly body the illusion of a "successful entrance into the space of the Other" (9).

Cartagena singularizes herself as the representative of the infirm people and in *Grove* she speaks on behalf of the sick in order for them to listen, but more importantly, in order to teach the healthy a valuable lesson. By underlining her isolation, Cartagena proposes a strongly victimized profile of the disabled: "worldly pleasures despise us, health forsakes us, friends forget us, relatives get angry, and even one's mother gets annoyed with her sickly daughter, and one's father despises the son who with chronic affliction dwells in his home" (46). Disease and disability—she says—divide society more harshly than classes, races, or gender. Sickness quarantines an out-of-the-norm group. Cartagena belongs to this group but her writing sets her apart and above the rest. With regards to the infirm people, it legitimizes her as a spoke person. With regards to the healthy people, it allows her to overcome her disability and encounter them in equality. The embodiment of her disability, as Victoria Rivera says, grants her with

“moral authority” and authorizes her to lead others (62). Illness, Rivera continues, is “paradoxically providing her a position of strength” (74). In consequence, Cartagena’s *Grove* shows the intertwining of disability and writing, and can be considered as a great example of how social isolation can be vanquished through a literary work.

Writing not only serves individual and collective purposes but ultimately a divine one. Language, says Cartagena, has been granted to humankind in order to praise God and understand His wonders, in order to know, to teach, and to teach what we know. It serves epistemological inquiry and dialectical reasoning. “What is the principal reason why we have been given language and speech? I truly believe the principal reason... is to praise and bless God... And it is clear that speech and language are given to us ... in order to ask questions and be answered... Thus language by itself is only valuable in two ways: one is to praise and bless God, the other to preach to the people” (27). According to Cartagena, language serves for praising God and His wonders but in order to do so we must first be knowledgeable of His wonders. To attain this knowledge, we need to follow the Socratic method of ‘giving birth’ knowledge through dialogue—as in the *maieutic* procedure. Once apprehended, knowledge should be disseminated through preaching. In short, someone who uses language wisely is someone who asks questions, gives answers, and preaches them—just like Cartagena does.⁷

Cartagena’s wise use of language echoes the main tenets of late medieval Humanism that aimed to reconcile religion and reason (Rivera Garretas “Los dos” 247-54). In medieval humanism, a religious argument had to convince because it was rooted in reason. Cartagena thus links theology and philosophy and in *Grove* moves from the physical (her body) into the metaphysical (God’s calling) and deeply into the epistemological (her ways of knowing). Interestingly enough, this un-corporeal discourse (both metaphysical and epistemological) is profoundly mediated by her body. Cartagena’s discourse on the (disabled) body thus serves to construct a philosophy about epistemological inquiry in the service of God as well as a theology about spiritual growth in the service of reason.

Reason, Cartagena argues, is more prone to dwell in the disabled than in the healthy: “reason more openly influences the infirm than the healthy... suffering makes the invalid... powerful in inward thought” (65). If the infirm are more reasonable and thoughtful than the healthy and prosperous, it is because God has compensated their unruly bodies with divine grace. The infirm, she says, are also more virtuous than their healthy counterparts: “suffering shatters pride and fosters humility, it removes avarice and gives generosity, it curves envy and encourages charity, it prohibits gluttony and imposes abstinence, it takes away anger and brings meekness, and it never allows idleness into his house” (50). *Grove of the Infirm* emphasizes the infirm’s lack of vices or the depth of their insights, and stresses their exceptionality to an extent that it places them above the healthy. In this argument, Cartagena follows Matthew’s dictum that “those who are last will be first,” a dictum that goes very much against the grain of the monarchic and hierarchical structure of pre-imperial Spain (Matt 20.16).

For Cartagena, the infirm have achieved a certain degree of virtue on their own right because they have been forced to bear involuntarily multiple hardships. God loves the martyrs who willingly accept to suffer but He loves even more the invalid “who

⁷ It should be noted that Cartagena is writing in a moment in which, as Patricia Ranft and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton have said, the Catholic Church’s doctrine mainly impeach women from preaching.

suffer against their will...” and because of that, they should “feel more obligated to love and serve Him above all others” (56). The infirm are more beloved by God and have an exceptional status in relation to the healthy and prosperous but they also have a bigger duty. Cartagena’s text admires the courage of the sick but also seeks to guide them, to make them comply to their obligations. Feeling invested with divine authority, she rises as their legitimate speaker and writes a guide for them not to be good, but to be better, to perfect their already earned (sickly) godly grace and achieve the final degree of spiritual perfection.

Patience is for Cartagena the ultimate virtue. Patience is not just “tolerating one’s misfortunes”—first degree of Patience—but striving “with all diligence and care to obtain spiritual benefits from the hardships”—second and ultimate degree of Patience (52). Patience, she says, must be interpreted as painful wisdom, issued from *pathos* that is suffering, and *science* that is knowledge. The infirm people’s divine grace do not stem just from their condition; a man cannot “win with one malady a dozen blessings,” but if he tolerates his “afflictions wisely and discreetly” (patiently, like Cartagena) then he will be virtuous and touched by God’s grace (50).

Cartagena explicitly says that her text does not address the stronger: “I address and admonish only the sick, sad, and sorrowful for their ailments and suffering, so that we may use our tribulation and human sadness to procure spiritual joy with devout and healthy intention” (45). However, she is addressing all humankind since one day or another, all human beings will inevitably fall sick. To some extent, she is representing the currently sick *and* the stronger (that is, the future sick), but more importantly, she is stressing her legitimacy by saying: “I... hope that everyone recognizes the great mercy of the Lord manifested in me” (41). Cartagena’s godly mercy makes her appear stronger not just to the infirm (to whom she claims to represent) but especially to the healthy to whom she obliquely decries. Her divine gift has set her aside, she has endured it patiently, she has shown excellence, and for doing so she has become God’s chosen.⁸

Grove thus oscillates between particularism and universalism. Dayle Seidennspinner has considered Cartagena a “universal exemplar of suffering humanity” because she can be seen as an outcast of many ranks: as a woman, a woman writer, a nun, a deaf person, and a *conversa* (123). When Cartagena addresses all present and future infirm, she universalizes her difference. She bonds with others through her weakness. She becomes a medium between the healthy and the infirm, between (present and future) infirm and God. However, being a deaf writer marks her exceptionality. It makes her an individual wonder of God. *Grove* thus praises the infirm, but more importantly it praises Cartagena, her body, her thought, and her work. Particularism here is key.

Grove was probably written after Toledo’s riots against *conversos* in 1474—in which counselors, notaries, and judges were dethroned from their positions because of their ‘racial’/religious background (Seidennspinner 6). *Grove*’s universalism thus can be understood as a strategy to fit in, just like her grandfather’s massive conversions.⁹

⁸ Cartagena can be categorized, according to Linda Olson, as one of “those medieval individuals who use its story of spiritual progress as a mode for their own textualization of memory” (9).

⁹ Victoria Rivera Cordero and James Hussar have said that there was an ideological equivalence in the fifteenth century between the Jews and the sick in Spain. Hussar documents that Jews were seen as a “diseased segment that threatened to contaminate both Church and State” (156). Irene Alejandra Molina adds that Cartagena’s uncle, Alonso, wrote in 1450—after the Toledo riots—the *Defensorium unitatis*

Universalism also serves her as an ideological device to imagine and foster a more open, inclusive, and egalitarian society—in the same fashion as late medieval Humanists advocated for spiritual (and gender) equality through the *Devotio Moderna*.

Cartagena's universalism, however, cannot be considered as a totalizing strategy because there is a gap between Cartagena's ideal and her actual audience. Her readers were not the invalid or forgotten but the educated sphere (the *letrados*), a healthy and prosperous masculine sphere who knew how to read and write. On one hand, this is the audience that can easily modify the societal structure that Cartagena condemns (in which the infirm are despised by the healthy), but on the other hand, it is evident that her lesson did not reach the forgotten who needed it the most. In consequence, *Grove* sets up a masquerade because Cartagena does not actually address those who suffer but instead a very exclusive and powerful crowd. Now, Cartagena uses the vernacular instead of the Latin and by doing so, as Joan Cammarata has noted, Cartagena's linguistic choice aims "to reach a larger audience outside the convent that did not have her privileged upbringing and education," an audience mostly composed of women who were not necessarily versed in Latin, but were (like Cartagena) able to read the vernacular (43).

Cartagena's allegory of the grove further complicates the universalistic claim since it is both an inclusive and exclusive space. Cartagena and French late medieval woman philosopher Christine de Pizan both recurred to images of allegorical spaces to comfort the marginalized and provide them with solace from social unrest. As Joan Kelly has noted, Pizan's *City of Ladies* uses the citadel, a gender exclusive space that accommodates a ruling female elite in the same fashion as the men's citadel (9-12). And although Cartagena's grove is more natural, and physically and symbolically more open, it is also an isolated space closer to the island (or "ynsula" as she calls it) than to the open forest (38). The image of a grove implies that only *some* can access and not everyone. Thus, while those who have been chosen are the infirm, a closer look unveils that the grove is also accessible to another exclusive group, the educated or *letrados*, those who read books, books which she calls "wonderful crafting from healthful groves" (24). The grove is then the *letrados'* sphere in which Cartagena as a strong privileged writer meets her strong privileged public.

If in *Grove* Cartagena fails to communicate with all the infirm with the exception of those who are able to read her, in *Wonder at the Works of God* (her second text), she claims to speak on behalf of all women, but once again, her discourse obliquely addresses the male *letrados* sphere and targets a select group of empowered women who knew how to write and read. Although a primary approach may lead us to think that *Wonder* is a defense of all women's intellectual rights, Cartagena always remains within the borders of her social class. She constantly reminds us that she is the strong heritor of the literary, philosophical, theological, and political legacy of the Cartagena family.

When analyzing the history of women's agency, feminist and critical theorist Nancy Fraser recommends to "employ categories and explanatory models that reveal rather than occlude relations in male dominance and female subordination. And... [that we] demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations" (121). Without any intention to 'obfuscate' the male dominance-female subordination paradigm in the context of medieval Spain, I would like to suggest that

christianae, a treatise in defense of *conversos* that demanded unity and compassion among the peninsular (5).

contrary to what she says or to what her critics have stated, Cartagena is not weak but rather hegemonic. Her instrumentalization of hegemony, however, does not diminish the validity or the effectiveness of her political plan. She uses hegemony in a productive way. For her, being hegemonic guarantees that she will have more chances to transform the political scene, that many doors will open for her work to transcend in and ultimately modify the stagnant public sphere.¹⁰ Reading Cartagena only through the partiality of gender, without taking into account all the dimensions that shape her identity, being a nun, a deaf person, a *conversa*, and a *letrada*, indeed obfuscates the intersectionality that works as the foundation of her prismatic politics of identity.

Cartagena does not advocate on behalf of all women but rather on behalf of certain exceptional individuals. In the same way that she considers that just the infirm participate in God's "singular love," in *Wonder* she says that God "wanted to confer more grace on one condition [female] than the other... [due to] a very secret purpose" (90). After considering women more exceptional and beloved by God than men, she also discriminates, among women, the 'good' from the 'bad woman,' following the tenets of sapiential literature. In the *Song of Songs*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes*, femininity is a Janus-like figure. On one side, there are the Sunamite (the loving wife), the "wise" and "diligent" wife, and the allegorical woman called Wisdom. On the other, there is the foreign "loud" woman who is "chattering and rambling, unwilling to bear silence, unable to keep her feet at home" (Prov. 6.26; 7.1-7.27). In the same fashion, Cartagena vilifies the 'wandering... bad woman' who is not "enclosed within the doors of their home... withdrawn from outside things and confined within the doors of secret meditation" (190). This woman is bad because she is public, restless, and mundane. She is not a nun in the convent who can afford to pay a dowry, and she is not the *dueña* or *letrada* enclosed behind doors. This 'bad' woman does not behave like Cartagena and she does not belong to Cartagena's class, thus she is not representing her. On the contrary, this 'bad woman' is rather scorned by her.

Cartagena draws from this Eve-Mary binary, but interestingly enough she does not recur to the Virgin Mary as the best representative of femaleness; probably because she was a *conversa* or because in her time the prevalence of the Virgin Mary as a female role model was not established.¹¹ She does, however, pay homage to her *converso* legacy by indirectly alluding to Wisdom-Sophia, and although she does not personify Wisdom-Sophia as a woman, sapiential literature is the main inspiration of her treatise: *Psalter* and *Psalms* are mentioned nineteen times and comprise 30 % of the document, only followed in importance by the *Book of Job* (Surtz 203; Baldrige 57; and Hussar 156).

¹⁰ Some may argue that although Cartagena may influence the political scene, her influence (if any) also dissolved in the cracks of an historical narrative dominated by the male gaze. They are partially right since—as Walter Benjamin has said—history has been told by those who have won and dominated. Yet, it is also important to note that male domination never existed without—although minimal—female intervention, although sometimes this female intervention validated male's hegemony. In other words, Cartagena's works exemplify that male domination has not been neither monolithic nor totalizing.

¹¹ Luis Miguel Vicente García argues that Cartagena does not rely on the Virgin Mary because Mary was distanced from "active knowledge" thus not connected with Cartagena's epistemological intention. It is important to note that Cartagena does not recur neither to the Virgin nor to Christ whom she only mentions in pages 58, 59, and 62 (101). Still, Allison Riley claims that Cartagena is writing a 'Christology' and following the *Imitatio Christi* (36).

Wisdom-Sophia echoes in her representation of Judith, the biblical virago, not an allegorical but a real woman, and the unmarried widow who cut off Holofernes's head with a sword to save the Jews from the Assyrians. Half-woman and half-man, Judith did with the sword what Cartagena aims to do with the pen (Surtz 203, Baldrige 69). By using the lethal Judith, Cartagena does not aim to threaten men or to declare war on them. Rather, she advises women to follow a more suited but equally important parallel road to warfare, that of letters: "it is better for women to be eloquent than being strong... and it is more fitted to her to use the pen than the sword" (150). Cartagena does not want to usurp men's place but to insert herself in the (mostly masculine) writer's circle.¹² Judith then is not important for being a warrior but for having "exceptional skill and grace," just like Cartagena (93). Overall, Cartagena does not 'defend' all women since she discriminates the (rich and) good from the (poor and) 'bad.' Instead of including all of her kind, she stresses the "industry and grace of only one woman:" Judith and/or herself (119).

Channeling Judith, Cartagena raises herself once again above the rest and like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, uses another strategy to strengthen her authority: the protection of the female *letrado* sphere. If Sor Juana seeks the protection of the Countess of Paredes and the Marquise of Laguna, Cartagena cunningly dedicates both her first and second treatises to the "virtuous lady" Juana de Mendoza, the advisor of Queen Isabel I of Castile and the wife of the prominent poet Gomez Manrique, who was both her friend and protector. In what she calls the "first feminist theory," Joan Kelly argues that by using gender as an overarching umbrella, medieval women writers like Cristine de Pizan (or for that matter, Cartagena) formulate a universal claim. Yet, Kelly also recognizes that medieval women writers belong to a "distinctly literate class that served the upper reaches of a ranked society" (7). Thus it is the task of the critic to reconcile their universalistic claim with their privileged positioning because in this case, gender solidarity is directly constrained by the demands of class solidarity.

Wonder looks for the protection of *letradas*, but it is also an open letter to the greater sector of the *letrados*, since the latter questioned the originality of Cartagena's *Grove of the Infirm*. According to *Wonder*, *Grove* was not well received by its readers. We do not have other criticism than the one provided by Cartagena, who confesses that "some prudent men and also discreet women have marveled at a treatise that, with divine grace directing my weak womanly understanding, was written by my hand" (87). Cartagena thus writes a book about 'wonders' because some people 'marveled' at her writing. The reasons that these people gave, she says, are also astonishing: they are in awe of her writing because she is a deaf person but also—it seems—because she is a woman. In consequence, they do not believe that she actually wrote that book.

Cartagena explains those who show incredulity that their amazement emanates from a question of habit: "this is not customary in the female condition" (89). Women have not had the fortune to be seen as *letradas*, but their nature is the same as that of their male counterparts. Also, they have marveled at the fact that the text was written by an

¹² María M. Rivera Garretas says that Cartagena writes without "masculine mediation" ("Vias" 67) and Marian Ochoa de Uribe says that she aims to the "systematic decomposition of the other [male] discourse" in order to "act upon the other's discourse and create a space for her own" (Rivera "Vias" 67; Ochoa 183). Yonsoo Kim argues that her "discourse transgresses the male discursive boundaries of her time, thus constructing a new feminine space" (Kim "Suffering" 6). But Cartagena does not seem to want to invent a new space, or one without masculine mediation, she wants to legitimize her place as a woman writer within the *letrado* sphere, she looks for recognition.

infirm, a deaf woman that ‘speaks.’ Its exceptionality is then double: “their awe does not result from the merits of my text but from the defects of its author; as we see from experience when someone of simple and crude understanding says something meaningful” (87). When Cartagena brings the example of the “simple and crude understanding” who says something “meaningful” and provokes awe, she both identifies and dis-identifies with the “reprobate” person. As the ‘reprobate’ person, she has inspired awe. Yet, she cleverly and simultaneously includes herself in the group that marvels at someone (“we marvel”), thereby rejecting the identity of someone to be marveled at. Teresa then oscillates between identifying and dis-identifying with the simple and crude person who is specifically designated in this passage as a man and not a woman. As Deborah Ellis has noted, Cartagena as the outsider “sometimes tries to join the insider and sometimes tries to reject him” (46). In this passage, she advances a politics of identification and dis-identification with both the insider *and* the outsider that becomes the signature of her writings and of her as an author.

Cartagena laments that people have disregarded the text’s wisdom and instead focus all of their attention in the physical, moral, and social value of the author. They criticize *Grove* for what she is and not for what it is written. She thus condemns the easy association they have made between moral and/or physical defects with literary shortcomings: “prudent men have marveled at the treatise I wrote... because of me and my justly deserved adversities” (88). By stating this fact, Cartagena emphasizes that these particular readers are not so “prudent” and “discreet” as they would like to be considered.

Wonder is thus a forensic defense of Cartagena’s right to write and, according to Hutton, a defense of all women writers. However, despite viewing Cartagena’s defense as encompassing all women writers, contemporary critics have systematically failed to see Cartagena as a legitimate author. Like her medieval readers, they accuse her of shortcomings and even plagiarism. Lewis Joseph Hutton considers Cartagena “the first woman in Spanish history to write in defense of all women” but he also says that *Grove* is a “dry” transplant of Benedict XIII’s *Book of Consolations of Human Life* and that its quality is rather bad: “her treatises do not belong to the highest category of literary creation” (Hutton “Introduction” 8, 23). Likewise, Carmen García defends Cartagena’s relevance but says that her “theoretical outcome is not completely excellent” (157). And Alan Deyermond even goes so far as to say that she was “moderately well-read but not a prodigy of learning” and that “she may well not have been aware that she had a personality” (23-24). Cartagena’s textual worth still seems to be more dependent upon her female condition than upon her actual writing.

With regards to her contemporaries’ accusations of plagiarism, Cartagena responded that “no professor and no *letrado* advised me, nor I translated from books, as some people with malicious admiration used to say” (131). Barbara Newman has classified the most common arguments that have been historically used to annihilate women writer’s agency: “she did not actually write—some man did... she wrote it, all right—but she should not have. Or she wrote it and it makes no sense. Or she wrote it and it is not bad, for a woman” (232). Kerry Ann Kautzman has noticed that Cartagena was attacked by her public because she was highly-educated and exposed to people and materials of “uncommon quality” (4). In her case, and overall in early modern *letradas*, it is evident that men fostered women’s cultural knowledge but once these empowered women entered the public sphere, these same men became anxious and felt the need of

‘containing the leak’ by invalidating the legitimacy of either the text or the writer or both altogether.

Cartagena’s cunning strategy to counterattack the arguments that her readers had used against her was —once again—to use weakness as her most powerful weapon. In *Wonder*, she stresses female physical weakness in an allegory of the bark and the medulla. Using the Latin etymology of the Spanish word *mujer* (woman) that stems from *mulier* or *mollities*, she considers women as ‘bland’ while men are strong, since the Spanish *varón* (man) comes from *vir-vis*, which means ‘force.’ Cartagena then says that just as bark and medulla are interdependent, man and woman need each other: “the strength and hardness of the bark protects and preserves the medulla by resisting on the outside the inclemencies of the weather. The medulla, encased because it is weak and delicate, works inwardly and gives power and vigor to the bark; and thus the one preserves and helps the other” (91). Continuing a long tradition of approaches to gender difference, Cartagena argues that men and female are different but that their difference is neither antagonistic nor hierarchical but rather complementary. On the other hand, as Ronald Surtz has mentioned, Cartagena may be using the two senses of this metaphor, one in which women are soft and bland like the medulla, and another in which they are more substantial than the superficial bark (202, 206).

Cartagena’s main argument with regards to gender difference is that God gives grace to all of His creatures without discrimination, they are different because of physical and social conditions, but they are equal to God in both spirit and intellect: “He who could infuse the understanding of men with knowledge can infuse the understanding of women” (90). Moreover if women have an imperfect understanding, “God’s divine greatness can readily repair this imperfection” (90). Just like she echoes the rationality of medieval Humanism, Cartagena echoes the tenets of *Devotio Moderna*, a medieval philosophical theology that proposed spiritual equality for men and women by stressing that souls have no gender. German theologian Meister Eckhart interpreted Genesis very differently than Saint Paul by saying that “He did not make her out of man’s head or his feet, so that she would be neither woman nor man for him, but so that she might be equal” (quoted in Ranft 180). To spiritual equality, Cartagena adds intellectual equality, and in doing so, she confronts all medieval men writers, who could concede that women were “naturally capable of the same virtues as men” (Castiglione) but still believed that God reserved for men more “excellence” or understanding than for women (Álvaro de Luna) (Ranft 250). When using the metaphor of the medulla to define woman’s physical blandness, Cartagena thus perpetuates the stereotype of physical inequality but when she says that “God has no favorites” neither in intellect nor in virtue, she fosters the recognition of intellectual and spiritual equality across gender lines (94).

Once again, in *Wonder* weakness strengthens her writing. Cartagena uses *captatio benevolentiae* (or the excessive humility that Josefina Ludmer has called the ‘strategies of the weak’)¹³ and coins the term ‘weak womanly understanding’ (“flaco mujeril entendimiento”) in order to stress herself and/or her text as a great example of feebleness: “my understanding has no power,” “the edifice [text] is not good... but rather slight and weak,” the text is “an insignificant thing” or “a brief work of little substance” (Ludmer

¹³ Josefina Ludmer calls ‘tricks of the weak’ a sum of various discursive tactics that women writers use to confront hegemonic authority among which there is the ‘false modesty’ or in Cartagena’s texts the claim of having a ‘weak womanly understanding.’

88, Cartagena 86-88). What in *Grove* is physical weakness, in *Wonder* is intellectual and literary frailty. Nonetheless, *Wonder's* strength comes from God who gave her "divine grace" so she "[knows] how to form her words" (87). She says how her "weak womanly understanding... follows my Savior... How wise is to know God, and how prudent is to understand His benefits! And how healthy is to know one self, our own failures and shortcomings!" (139). In this antiphrasis, or going against one's own grain, Cartagena affirms that because of the awareness of her own weaknesses, failures, and shortcomings, she is indeed wise, she now 'knows' and 'understands.' Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell have said that early modern nuns "wrote from a position of perceived strength and avowed weakness" (16). What makes them strong is that they recognize their limits. Antiphrasis thus acutely serves their intentions and becomes the privileged rhetorical device that displays their mastery by acknowledging their lack.

Just as with the infirm, Cartagena's "simple and crude intellect" is favored by God who asked her to become "guardian of His law;" thus men and women should not marvel at her writing because it is "infused with divine grace" (98). Those who doubt her show a "heavy and ponderous and dull" understanding, but more importantly, they disregard the fact that all acquired and infused knowledge stems from God (99). So if Cartagena is defending *Grove* is not because she needs to defend herself but rather to defend God. People had a "doubtful wonder," their incredulity was "offensive;" and it was her responsibility as a Christian not "to ignore my own offense... [that] undermine[s] greatly the benefit and grace that God wrought for me" (88). Divine power thus shields both her persona and her work.

Cartagena was a deaf woman who wrote to combat her physical silence and who was asked (paradoxically, one more time) to remain silent. Silence, though, is as prolific as it is discourse. Silence makes sound to feel awkward, unbearable, unpredictably daring. Profuse silence shuts down speech. Cartagena was silenced in and beyond her lifetime. Her contemporaries gave her twice the silent treatment since, to this point, no document discussing the 'scandal' of a deaf woman who wrote has been discovered. Today, the canon—another mechanism that imposes silence—has left her in the shadows of more publicized Spanish female writers such as Teresa de Jesús and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. And the attention that she has had as the first women writer in the peninsula also obstructs the study of other medieval female writers such as Florencia Pinar, Leonor López de Córdoba, Mayor Arias, María Sarmiento, Isabel González, Tecla de Borja, Constanza de Castilla, or sor Isabel de Villena whose works are harder to find than Cartagena's.

Today, if Cartagena is revisited, most of the criticism focus on *Wonder* and the gender issue and completely overlooks the philosophical and theological underpinnings she discusses in *Grove*. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf have found that early modern nun's "texts contain almost the only record we have of the consciousness of early modern women in Hispanic land" (12). And here I would like to go a step further and say that Cartagena is not only important for being the first woman writer in the Spanish peninsula or for showing 'early modern women writers' consciousness. She is important because she displays in her writing an informed and sophisticated theological and philosophical thought whose quality does not stem from her being a woman or a deaf person but rather from her being a theologian, a philosopher, and a writer. Cartagena thus should be

approached through her content rather than through her gender—a fault that many feminist critics may fall into when addressing early modern women’s writing.

If we read her works instead of *reading her* through her works, we may realize how Cartagena reconciled body, reason, and spirit; how she theorized the roles of writing, language, and thought; how she negotiated a liberatory politics of identity by targeting audiences, making alliances, and remaining exceptional. We may realize how her texts showcase not only the ideology of a woman but that of an epoch: rational Humanism, the new lights of *Devotio Moderna*, and the internal struggles of a society dealing with so many different Others (Jews, women, the sick, etc.). Furthermore, Cartagena’s works showcase two traits that will be echoed by future writers—both male and female alike: the argumentative effectiveness of a powerful discourse on weakness; and the way in which by inhabiting the intimate sphere an author enters the scene and meets the public.

Works Cited

- Baldrige, Mary. "The Tree as Unifying Element in the Works of Teresa de Cartagena." *Cuaderno internacional de estudios humanísticos y literatura* 7 (2007): 55-72.
- Barberet, Denise Renée. "Weak Womanly Understanding". Ph.D. dissertation. University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 1998.
- Cammarata, Joan. "Teresa de Cartagena: Writing from a Silent Space in a Silent World." *Monographic Review* 16 (2000): 38-51.
- Cortés Mortimer, María del Mar. "Poner riquezas en mi entendimiento": Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y Sor Teresa de Cartagena." *Lectora: revista de dones i textualitat* 10 (2004): 377-92.
- Deyermond, Alan. "El convento de dolencias: The Works of Teresa de Cartagena," *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 1.1 (1976): 19-29.
- Ellis, Deborah. "Unifying Imagery in the Works of Teresa de Cartagena: Home and the Dispossessed." *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 17.1 (1992): 44-53.
- Fraser, Nancy. "What is Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender." *New German Critique* 35 (1985): 97-131.
- García, Carmen. "Los tratados de Teresa de Cartagena dentro de la evolución de la epístola." *Quien hubiese tal ventura: Medieval Hispanic Studies in Honour of Alan Deyermond*. Ed. Andrew M. Beresford. London: Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1997. 149-157.
- Hussar, James. "The Jewish Roots of Teresa de Cartagena's *Arboleda de los enfermos*." *La Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures* 35.1 (2006): 151-70.
- Hutton, Lewis. "Introduction," *Arboleda de los enfermos y Admiración Operum Dey*. Ed. Lewis J. Hutton. Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1967. 1-23.
- "Teresa de Cartagena: A Study in Castilian Spirituality." *Theology Today* 12 (1956): 480.
- Kautzman, Kerry Ann. "The Parallel and Intersecting Planes of Teresa de Cartagena's *Arboleda de los enfermos* and *Admiración operum Dey*." Ph.D. dissertation. U of Cincinnati, 1993.
- Kelly, Joan. "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes* 1400-1789." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8.1 (1982): 4-28.
- Kerby-Fulton, Kathryn. "When Women Preached. An Introduction to Female Homiletic, Sacramental and Liturgical Roles in the Later Middle Ages." *Voices in Dialogue. Reading Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. South Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 2005. 31-55.
- Kim, Yonsoo and Dayle Seidenspiner. "Historicizing Teresa: Reflections on New Documents Regarding Sor Teresa de Cartagena." *La Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Spanish Language and Literature* 32.2 (2004): 121-50.
- Kim, Yonsoo. "Suffering as Such: Reframing Teresa de Cartagena's Discourse of the Ultimate Other." *Dissidences. Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism* 6-7 (2010): 1-23.
- Ludmer, Josefina. "Tricks of the Weak." *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. Ed. Stephanie Merrim. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991. 86-94.

- Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Narratives and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Molina, Irene Alejandra. "La arboleda de los enfermos de Teresa de Cartagena: un sermón consolatorio." M.A. thesis. U of Texas-Austin, 1990.
- Newman, Barbara. "More Thoughts on Medieval Women's Intelligence." *Voices in Dialogue. Reading Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. South Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 2005. 231-242.
- Ochoa de Uribe, Marian. "El yo polémico de Teresa de Cartagena en la *Admiración de las obras de Dios*: las argucias del débil por entrar en el canon." *Letras de Deusto* 29.84 (1999), 179-88.
- Olson, Linda. "Reading, Writing, and Relationships in Dialogue." *Voices in Dialogue. Reading Women in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton. South Bend: U of Notre Dame P, 2005. 1-30.
- Ranft, Patricia. *Women and Spiritual Equality in Christian Tradition*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1998.
- Riley, Allison. "La Autohagiografía en la Edad Media." MA thesis. Georgia State U, 2011.
- Rivera Cordero, Victoria. "Spatializing Illness: Embodied Deafness in Teresa de Cartagena's *Arboleda de los enfermos*." *La Corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures and Cultures* 37.2 (2009): 61-77.
- Rivera Garretas, María Milagros. "Los dos infinitos en Teresa de Cartagena, humanista y mística del siglo XV," *Miscelánea Comillas: Revista de teología y ciencias humanas* 69.134 (2011): 247-254.
- "Teresa de Cartagena: la infinitud del cuerpo." *Acta histórica et archaeologica mediaevalia* 20-21 (1999): 755-766.
- "Vías de búsqueda de existencia femenina libre: Perpetua, Christine de Pizan y Teresa de Cartagena." *Duoda: Revista d'estudis feministes* 5 (1993): 51-71.
- Rodríguez, Gregorio. "La autobiografía como exemplum: La *Arboleda de los enfermos* de Teresa de Cartagena." *Escritura autobiográfica: Actas del II Seminario Internacional del Instituto de Semiótica Literaria y Teatral*. Ed. José Romera Castillo. Madrid: UNED, 1992. 367-70.
- Rose, Constance. "Teresa de Cartagena and the Uncircumcised Ear." *Studies in Honor of Denah Lida*. Mary Berg and Lanin Gyurko, eds. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 2005. 84-91.
- Schlau, Stacey and Electa Arenal. "Reclaiming the Mother Tongue: History and Spiritual Politics." *Untold Sisters. Hispanic Nuns in their Own Works*. Ed. Amanda Powell. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1989. 1-17.
- Seidenspinner, Dayle. "Introduction" *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena*. Trans. and Ed. Dayle Seidenspinner. Cambridge, Eng.: D.S. Brewer, 1998, 1-21.
- Surtz, Ronald. "El llamado feminismo de Teresa de Cartagena." *Studia hispanica medievalia III: Actas de las IV jornadas internacionales de literatura española medieval: Agosto 19-20 1993*. Buenos Aires: U Católica Argentina, 1995. 199-207.
- Vicente García, Luis Miguel. "La defensa de la mujer como intelectual en Teresa de Cartagena y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." *Mester* 18.2 (1989): 95-104.