Glyn Redworth. 2008
The She-Apostle.
The Extraordinary Life and Death of Luisa de Carvajal
Oxford: Oxford University Press

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The more we learn about the devotion and endurance of Catholicism in early modern England, Scotland, Wales and the Protestant-ruled parts of the Netherlands, the stranger it seems that Catholics were never able to assert themselves politically in a sustained fashion, or influence mainstream culture profoundly or, in the long run, maintain their strength in numbers. The story is in some respects one of a slow withering of identity and waning of collective memory, but in the cities effective state repression seems to have been decisive. One of the most impassioned voices to express frustration in the face of persecution in early seventeenth-century London was that of Luisa de Carvajal. Orphaned in childhood and subjected, in her guardian's house, to discipline abusive even by the standards of her day, she rejected marriage but had no more vocation for the life of a conventional nun than of a conventional wife. At the age of nearly forty she abjured an aristocratic inheritance in Spain to become the first independent female missionary, dedicating her life to the attempted re-evangelisation of a country she did not know, and whose language she could not speak.

In broad outline the story Glyn Redworth tells of her is familiar. Elizabeth Rhodes wrote a good biography a few years ago (2000). Redworth has not found any significant new sources and properly keeps his predecessor's work in view, sometimes making his challenges implicit. He takes us deeper into the problems, however, than ever before and provides a more satisfying account, partly because of his faithful knowledge of the backgrounds in English, Spanish and religious history (though there is scope to dissent from

his assumption that Spanish policy towards England changed with Philip II's death (178) and his assertion that Morisco "expulsees" from Spain amounted to "a third of a million" (186)), and partly because of his deft readings of the evidence, which are always alert to the subtle linguistic nuances, pertinent rhetorical conventions and cunningly concealed agendas.

Luisa emerges as a vital, paradoxical person. She disputed with fishwives in Cheapside about Christ and advised princes and kings about marriages, diplomatic appointments, peace and war. She deftly manipulated men, but always seemed to defer to male authority. She evinced infinite charity to the victims of Protestant intolerance but cheerfully urged on the martyrdom of the Moriscos. She inspired love in spite of herself. She was always a source of "headache" (175) to Ambassador Don Pedro de Zúñiga, but he never lost patience with her. His successor treated her with *froideur* yet begged for her help. She was always a focus of conflict for her companions in religion, who were often the object of her barbed critiques, but they never abandoned her. She was a ferocious networker, shameless and successful in soliciting funds for her mission; and she embraced poverty with utter sincerity. She was no feminist *avant la lettre* but her sense of mission transcended conventional notions of gender. Redworth's reading of her rule for her companions in religion makes Luisa "a female Jesuit" (155), who intended to create a female equivalent of the Company, with religious women who would sally from their convent to contend against heresy in the streets.

She made converts. The most poignant story is of her carpenter, Richard Brough, a bible-thumping Protestant, whom she engaged in disputation and who found her final sufferings and death so inspiring that he ended up as the resident factotum of the English College of Valladolid. Her greatest achievements, however, were twofold: first, as an example of steadfastness and source of comfort to the existing Catholic community in London, and especially to their martyrs; and secondly as a ghoulish Pimpernel –a rescuer of relics. Redworth describes rivetingly her midnight grave-grubbing for the quartered limbs of martyred Catholics, which the authorities buried extra-deep and mixed with the remains of criminals to deter relic-hunters, before Luisa lovingly recovered the grisly, holy specimens and dried them out for secret export to the continent.

Ironically, possession of her own remains was so fiercely contested that it remains unresolved, frustrating the establishment of a cult and impeding the canonisation Luisa seems to have deserved.

Of the problems Redworth leaves unsolved, the first is that of why Luisa undertook such an unprecedented and unpromising enterprise in the first place. She knew England by repute long before visiting it, having lived next door to the English College in Valladolid. She felt drawn by stories of English martyrs, and resolved on her mission even before giving her inheritance away to the Jesuits. She always insisted that she went to England "to seek martyrdom" (61). Strictly speaking, however, true martyrdom is always unsought and Luisa was too well educated and too interested in theology to suppose otherwise. She must have known, moreover, that England would never dare execute a Spaniard of such impeccable social connections as herself, even under the considerable provocation she rather ostentatiously gave. Probably, though she expressed pious envy of English friends who died for their faith, what she really wanted was sanctification through suffering.

In some ways, her hopes were long frustrated. Redworth argues convincingly that the English authorities deferred her imprisonment because they were unwilling to acknowledge menace in someone of her sex. But even before she gleefully embraced two brief spells in prison she endured so many trials of poverty, indignity, broken health, physical pain, danger, stress and stifled hopes that England can be said to have justified itself as a choice of place of mortification. Most commentators piously classified her death as martyrdom because, although the enemy did not inflict it, they precipitated it by using her so ill.

Despite painstaking efforts and strenuous speculations, Redworth can cast no light on why the powers-that-be in the Catholic world supported Luisa in a course they might have deemed unwomanly or unwise. It is tempting to appeal to her character –her powers of persuasion, her evidence of vocation (manifest, not least, in her ability to master English eventually) and the defiant habits that helped keep her out of gaol for so long. Even harder to understand is why she was allowed to stay in England after her first arrest, with its adverse resonances in international politics. Perhaps, as Redworth suggests (177), Archbishop Ribera wanted her prayers –

or perhaps he wanted a martyr to hallow his policy of war *à l'outrance* against the heretics. Finally, the problems of exactly who formed her permanent household and religious community in London, and how deeply and extensively she helped to connect London's Catholics, continue to defy exact solutions.

Redworth, as always, writes well, at a brisk, engaging pace, which the short chapters help sustain. Flashes of donnish humour enliven the pages. On page 194, in my favourite passage, the author describes Luisa's prostration before two Catholic martyrs, and how she kissed "their lucky feet," before adding, "She also sent […] pear tartlets." There are some editorial lapses. Luisa's companion, Inés de la Encarnación, is introduced before we are told who she is; and there are distressing signs that misleading grammar-checking software has been used.

References

Elizabeth Rhodes 2000. *This Tight Embrace: Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (1566-1614)*. Milwaukee Wisc.: Marquette University Press.

How to cite this review:
Fernandez Armesto, Felipe. Review of Glyn Redworth. 2008. *The She-Apostle. The Extraordinary Life and Death of Luisa de Carvajal.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. *SEDERI* 20 (2010): 173-176.

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