The dissertation aims to investigate the literary authority and models of authorship in the early modern female writings which emerged from the contexts of convents and monasteries during the so called Golden Ages of Spanish culture. It seeks to put on display the diversity of the models and specific modes of literary expression applied by the nun writers, so that they could achieve an authorial position that allowed them to intervene in the literary discourse within and beyond the convent walls. Some of the authors acted exclusively within the internal space, in its private or collective dimensions, while others linked it with their immediate physical and human environment, and still others directly participated in the pivotal literary movements of their time, acting as agents of unsuspected cultural transfers. Social relations and bounds, the intra- and extramural dynamics, the new modalities of writings and the revision of the inherited traditions are analyzed in the study, which may be positioned at the intersection between gender studies, literary and cultural history, and religious history of the Iberian Peninsula of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion section. Additionally, an appendix completes the analysis providing bio-bibliographical information about the authors of the corpus.

In the initial chapter, the theoretical approximation to the figure of the author as the institutional category is proposed in order to reflect on the development of authorship and the notion of the author in the early modern literary culture. Furthermore, the discursive components of the authorial figure are analyzed with the aim to establish an adequate methodological framework that would allow to reflect on the notions of female authority and literary authorship in the monastic milieu. The chapter closes with a proposal of an original interpretive model, using the abovementioned feminist dialogic perspective to study the texts written by female authors from the early modern period.

Further, the second chapter gives an overview of the sociohistorical coordinates of Spanish feminine monasticism. The factors influencing its development and specific nature were the reform of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain initiated by the Catholic Monarchs, the response to the Protestant Reformation, the position of women in early modern society, and, last but not least, the willingness of women to adopt the religious life. A special emphasis is put on the concepts constitutive for the development of the female literary tradition, which address such aspects as the role of female creators and readers across national literary culture; the negotiation with the official model of a nun writer; the influence of female patrons/editors; the relationship between the authors and readers/receptors; the motivation and patterns of literary communication; and the reception and circulation of texts.

Subsequently, in the third chapter a close reading of a wide scope of discourses written by religious women of early modern Spain is undertaken in order to inquire into their authorial position, which is understood in a twofold way—a function of the discourse and an identity position of the concrete historical subjects—and to examine not only the nuns’ active participation in the cultural and literary scene of their time but also their effective contribution to its transformation. The seventeen nun authors studied here—of whom five constitute the core of the analysis and the remaining crucial points of reference—embrace diverse religious rules, different orders, varied social and geographical context, dissimilar opportunities, motivations and abilities in writing, distinct receptivity and esthetic sensibility and, finally, dissimilar willingness for spiritual commitment. Such a diverse and vast corpus of sources, mainly manuscripts and old printed books, which embraces literary texts, autobiographical and mystical testimonies, paraliterary sources and paratexts grants us a comprehensive view on the literary authority and female authorship and its problematic historical visibility. Therefore, special emphasis is placed on the following elements: the significance of the discursive strategies applied by the authors in order to obtain recognition of their literary authority, the forms of agency of these authors in relation to their direct and indirect audience,
and the construction of the particular authorial positions according to their personal parameters and the sociocultural coordinates of the moment.

In other words, the main objective of the analysis is not only to acknowledge the cultural production of the early modern nun writers but also to recognize the forms of subjectivity, constructed and applied by these authors, that were designed in the use of the literary genres and the present canons, but which nonetheless represented a significant alteration of the doxa of female intellectual inferiority.

In order to define the literary practice of these writers, the rhetorical structures they choose are analyzed. The proposed typology of female religious authorial models is arranged into five sections that are organized in accordance to the particular modalities of authorship manifested in the texts: argumentum ad verecundiam, argumentum ad feminam, argumentum ad auditorem, argumentum ad experientiam, and argumentum ad divinam voluntatem. The notion of the literary authorship, which is the unifying thread of the selected corpus, allows to recognize the textual production of the authors as “literary work” and embraces the subsequent contexts of the formulation of female literary authorship: the Teresian tradition seen as a first models of female literary authority; the literary authority constructed through paratexts; the model of intramural authorship; the mystics’ authority of and from the body; and the female agency and political providentialism.

The systematization refers to various rhetorical strategies and modes to discursively and socially construct the authorial position. Therefore, as it has been stated, the corpus is classified according to the models of argumentation and negotiation of the literary authorship and the circumstantial authority that made possible the intervention in the dynamics of the literary, spiritual and religious discourses of the following authors (referred by alphabetical order): Ana de Jesús Lobera (O.C.D.); Ana de Jesús, la Pobre (O.SS.T.); Ana de San Bartolomé (O.C.D.); Ana Francisca Abarca de Bolea (O. Cist.); Cecilia del Nacimiento (O.C.D.); Estefanía de la Encarnación (O.S.); Francisca de Santa Teresa (O.SS. T.); Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza (beata); Marcela de San Félix (O.SS. T.); María de Jesús de Ágreda (O.I.C.); María de San Alberto (O.C.D.); María de San José (O.C.D.); María de Santa Isabel (O.S.J.); María de Santo Domingo (O.D.); Mariana de San José (O.A.R); Teresa de Jesús María (O.C.D.); and Valentina Pinelo (O.A.R.).

In the way this project is designed, its aim is twofold. On the one hand, in analyzing the diverse strategies of literary authority and authorship, the study displays the diversity of the authorial position available to the nun writers and proposes a typology of female religious authorial models. Furthermore, by demonstrating how the particular authorial models are bound to one another, it shows how they shape the wider frame of the convent reality as the environment of female writers in the early modern period. On the other hand, it seeks to contribute to women’s studies, literary studies, history of literature and religion, being an impulse of a different reading of female religious writings, not only because it goes against the tide in raising new questions regarding some of the dominant approaches, but also mainly because it is a contribution to strengthening those approaches with a cautious outlook that underlines the close relation between gender and historical analysis.