
Most contemporary critics would concur, although they may proceed from diverse theoretical positions, that a literary work is not created in a void, that it is a cultural product of a specific time and a specific place. While the issue of feminine identity thematically unifies the essays edited by Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith, their collective strength resides in their respect for the historical and sociological context of the age in which the dramas they examine were written and performed. Hence, the contributing scholars have been able to present persuasive arguments for their interpretations, which are varied and often opposing. As Dawn L. Smith has written in her introductory essay:

The title of the collection is appropriately ambiguous so as to indicate many possible interpretations: these include the perceptions of women of both male and female writers; society’s views of women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain; and our view of those perceptions as critics living in the twentieth century.

The contributions of the fourteen North American Hispanists have been grouped under three divisional headings: 1) Theoretical Approaches; 2) Taking the Woman’s Part; and 3) Rape, Politics and sexual Inversion. The dramatists under scrutiny include Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, Tirso de Molina, Vélez de Guevara and the women, Ana Caro, María de Zayas and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Each critic brings his or her own theoretical approach to bear on the material, and these strategies range from semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychology, feminism, historicism to interpretation through myth. At times, the three group headings seem to function rather arbitrarily as is the case for Michael McGaha’s essay, “The Sources and Feminism of Lope’s Las mujeres sin hombres,” which could have easily been included with the papers in the second section that “take the woman’s part”. However, this does not constitute a criticism since most of the essays discuss issues and aspects of the comedia that are inextricably interconnected.

As one would expect, many of the studies focus on that stock character of the comedia, the “mujer varonil,” or, the masculine woman. It is one of those topics
that continues to inspire lively but scholarly debate. While none of the essays displays a strident feminist bias, some of the critics detect a subversive aspect to the "strong women" characters that populate the comedias. The essays by Larson, Crocetti, Soufas and Wilkins all consider the theme of subversion. Wilkins' paper, "Subversion Through Comedy?: Two Plays by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and María de Zayas," maintains that these dramatists actually use the conventional framework of the comedia in order to subvert the genre by imposing shifts in perspective that ultimately reflect their views as marginalized women writers.

While it may be plausible to detect critiques of patriarchal society in some works, given the Baroque penchant for role reversal, disguise, contrast and paradox, it would seem that any attempt to explore the issue of feminine identity in a Golden Age play should determine what can be considered literary convention and what could be deemed authorial intent. Attempts to establish the pro-feminism or anti-feminism of this or that dramatist risk being considered simply anachronistic arguments. Thomas Austin O'Connor is mindful of this in his essay on Calderón myth plays as he thoughtfully examines how Calderón's "varied dramatizations of the rape motif reveal fissures in sexist seventeenth-century Spain." (p. 170)

Thomas Case refuses to subscribe to the 'Lope as feminist for his day' theory, seeing Lope's use of the masculine woman, in certain historical plays, as a deliberate exploitation of a popular 'type' for a particular purpose. For Case, the issue is a political one, rooted in Lope's nationalism, not in any form of feminism. On the other hand, Daniel Heiple sees in Lope's play, La prueba de los ingenios, a willingness on the part of the dramatist to defend the intellectual equality of women. His essay endorses the 'pro-feminist stance' argument. Margaret R. Hicks reaches a similar conclusion through her examination of Lope's La bobia para los otros y discreta para sí. As Smith states in her introduction, "... for every critic who assures us that Tirso was a feminist, another can be found who supports the opposite view." (p. 22)

What lends integrity to this collection is the fact that each writer has situated his or her analysis in the social context of the period. Ruth Lundelius' "Paradox and Role Reversal in La serrana de la Vera" reminds us that the plays centering around the masculine woman were, for the most part, popular entertainment. The fact that Vélez de Guevara's "mujer varonil" is so harshly dealt with in this play, combined with the knowledge that this was indeed popular theatre, ominously confirm for Lundelius how powerful a tool a play could be for upholding society's norms.

Anita K. Stoll's interesting essay, "Lope's El anzuexo de Fenisa: A Woman for all Seasons," is not so much about the changing perception of the "picara-mujer varonil" as about the changing perception toward dramatic representation as she follows the three adaptations of Lope's play through the centuries. Thus, she is able to chart the shifting views of woman's place in society.
Finally, but perhaps serving as a fitting conclusion, Amy R. Williamsen’s essay, “Sexual Inversion: Carnival and ‘La mujer varonil’ in La fénix de Salamanca and La tercera de sí misma,” finds the source for the “mujer varonil” character type in society itself as she explores the link between the carnivalesque in society and on the stage. This final essay seems to give weight to Michael McGaha’s words: “... scholars are only now beginning to recognize that the ‘comedia’ accurately reflects the teeming diversity, intellectual ferment, and social tensions of the milieu that gave it birth.” (p. 167)

Each essay in this collection is worthy of attention and discussion. For this reason, the book is recommended to all who are interested in following the ongoing polemic about the perception of the female role in the comedias of Spain’s Golden Age.

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Shakespeare’s admirers have included many doctors who are fascinated by the extent of his knowledge of and unusual insights in medical matters. This has naturally been particularly true of psychiatrists, some of whose writings on such subjects as the development of Lear’s madness and Othello’s and Leontes’ jealousy have also impressed literary scholars. (The books on Shakespeare by J. Charles Bucknill of over a century ago are still worthy of attention.) Besides numerous articles in medical journals, physicians have also written several broader books on the range of Shakespeare’s knowledge of medicine, which specify Shakespeare’s familiarity with many drugs and other therapeutical methods and means, his knowledge of the symptoms of various diseases, of physiological processes (in the way they were understood in his time), and, as in the book by R. R. Simpson (1959), the remarkable quality and detail of several of his clinical descriptions. The book by Audrey Kail, a medical practitioner in Australia, is the latest addition to this literature.

We have good reasons for thinking that Shakespeare’s knowledge of medical and related subjects was fairly extensive, perhaps as large as that of law, for many hundreds of allusions are found in his plays and poems, and medical subject matter looms large in several longer episodes. Shakespeare’s son-in-law, John Hall, practised medicine in Stratford. And like many Elizabethan gentlemen and women, Shakespeare may well have owned a few medical books as tools for self-help. Many books offering basic medical guidance, some of them by learned men like Thomas