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Teresa Scott Soufas, ed. *Women's Acts: Plays by Women Dramatists of Spain's Golden Age.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. xvi + 326 pp. $45.00 (cloth) ISBN 0-8131-1977-4; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-0889-6.

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Women's Voices in a Golden Age

By providing a critical edition of the works of five female playwrights of Golden Age Spain, Teresa Scott Soufas' *Women's Acts* seeks to revise the canon of Spanish drama. She intends her collection of plays by these women–all of whom utilized the popular dramatic form of the comedia–to "break the silence that has engulfed them" (p. xiv). Due to the centrality of the comedia to the world of Golden Age Spanish culture and society, this is a significant undertaking which will have implications for students and scholars of women and literature in early-modern Spain.

Written by some of Spain's most famous playwrights (Lope de Vega and Calderon de la Barca, for example), the Spanish comedia is one of the defining features of Spain's legendary Golden Age of of literature.[1] Comedias were plays that were commercially popular, yet artistically rigorous. They were frequently performed in public theaters or *corrales* in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were a successful marriage of great art and public taste. The structure of the comedia was relatively formulaic (a feature which facilitated prolific production to satisfy the demands of a seemingly insatiable public): three acts comprising roughly 3,000 lines. The comedias privileged plot over individual characters, and the existing characters were defined by social and/or biological categories, rather than by distinctive personality traits.[2] Thus, for example, women were typically categorized by their station in life: wife, mother, nun.

Aside from their established literary contributions to the development of the dramatic form in Spain, these plays have also been taken as a barometer of the impact of the immense social and economic upheaval–which some would argue constituted a decline–experienced by Spain in this period. Thus, on the stages of the corrales Spain's playwrights critiqued the nobility, challenged various forms of political authority, and gave voice to the dissatisfactions of a country that felt itself being pushed off the world stage by weak rule, mismanagement, and the ascendancy of other European powers. The immense popularity of the comedias was undoubtedly also due to the fact that the plays tackled themes that resonated in the lives of many Spaniards: marriage, love, and honor.

Given the primacy of the comedias as a cultural artifact, then, the knowledge that women also wrote them is significant at many levels. To begin with, in an era when women had limited access to education and were discouraged from cultivating a public voice or presence, the knowledge and use by these women of the comedia as a tool for communication is noteworthy. These women had clearly received sophisticated educations that included the study of drama. Yet most strikingly, according to Soufas, they chose this popular form to give voice to a different set of issues than their male counterparts. While there is some common ground between male- and female-authored comedias, the ones presented by Soufas evidence a particular preoccupation with "male irresponsibility with regard to social mores and gender ideological demands" (p. ix) and the havoc that such recklessness wreaks in the lives of female characters. In Angela de Azevedo's *La margartia del Tajo que dio nombre a Santaren*, a woman makes a respectable marriage that is also, as luck would have it, a love match. Ultimately, however, the happiness of her marriage is shattered by her husband's obsession with a professed nun. This married woman has played by the rules of early-modern society and yet she still suffers pain and humiliation at the hands of her husband's inappropriate and scandalous obsession. The plays also address the issue of female autonomy. In Ana Caro Mallen de Soto's *El conde Patrinuples*, a young empress, Rosaura, struggles with the demand of her subjects–represented as men–that she make a respectable marriage. She is reluctant to do so, however, because she knows that such a union will compromise her independent political power.

The female-authored comedias, however, are not able

to tell us certain things that would help to gauge the extent of their impact. The evidence of their performance and reception of these works is quite murky–a dilemma which Soufas readily acknowledges. We have, in fact, no direct knowledge that any of these plays were publicly performed. There is evidence that male intellectuals were familiar with the works of these women. Ana Caro Mallen de Soto, for example, was included in a survey of notable citizens of her native Seville (p. 133). Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor was an active member in Madrid literary academies (and, in fact, penned numerous other works, including two famed collections of novellas). Yet an indication of the dissemination of the female-authored comedias, even to a confined court audience, is scanty. Soufas is aware of this, but finds a different significance in these works: "In an age when moralists still denounced women's public speech and activity, these women dramatists wrote and created *performable* and *utterable* (emphasis mine) works that, whether produced on a stage or not, reveal each writer's familiarity with the theatrical conventions and literary/artistic practices of the period" (p. ix). Thus, for Soufas the significance of these works lies in their potential for performance and utterance. This is no slight significance and Soufas is right to highlight it, yet we must acknowledge that his was a potential that may only have been grasped by a small audience of their contemporaries.

A stronger contextualization of the works in question would, in fact, serve to strengthen Soufas' argument. If their significance lies in that fact that they were written at all, then it would help considerably to know more about the place of these works in the context of literary works being produced by women in Spain and Europe in this period and the status of women in Golden-Age Spain. Soufas' introduction is helpful in beginning to address these issues, but is tantalizingly brief. How, for example, do female-authored comedias compare to other literature being produced by women in this period? Recent scholarship, for example, has examined the production of convent dramas in Spain and Italy and what these can tell us about the voice of women in the dramatic arts.[3] Further, in what ways are the comedias authored by women similar to and/or different from dramatic works written by other European women?

Additionally, the existence of such outstanding and provocatively-themed work by women in an era that sought their greater confinement and silencing is striking. The late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain witnessed an increasing preoccupation with the strict regulation of female behavior.[4] Nuns were required to observe strict enclosure, and parents were warned to guard the chastity of their daughters vigilantly by limiting their contact with the secular world. While the works of these female dramatists may speak to the dilemmas of such social constraints, the authorship of these women and the voices of their female characters still challenged and broke free of conventional expectations for female behavior. A greater sense of the relationship between these works and their socio-cultural context would help to underscore Soufas' argument about their significance.

Contextualization of this type is provided by another of Soufas' recent works, *Dramas of Distinction: A Study of Plays by Golden Age Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997). In her introduction to *Women's Acts*, however, Soufas does not suggest that the two are companion pieces and only refers the reader to this second work in her footnotes and bibliography. Yet their near-simultaneous publication by the same press indicates that this may have been the intent. Ultimately, in *Women's Acts* Soufas' most effective tool in providing context is her rich and useful bibliography.

Admittedly, my criticisms regarding context suggest the desire for a monographic study of these female playwrights, when what Soufas has sought to provide is a critical edition of these texts. In this, she has succeeded admirably. Collecting these eight plays in one volume will greatly enhance their accessibility to students and scholars of Golden Age Spanish literature. There is only one other modern edited collection of works by female Spanish dramatist of the Golden Age (p. xiv). Therefore, the publication of *Women's Acts* is an important undertaking.

Notes

[1]. I am greatly indebted in my understanding of the comedia to the study of Melveena McKendrick, *Theater in Spain, 1490-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[2]. McKendrick, 72-73.

[3]. See, for example, Elissa B. Weaver, "Suor Maria Clemente Ruoti, Playwright and Academician," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early-Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance," ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); and Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau,* Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works_ (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

[4]. For a full articulation of this see Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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