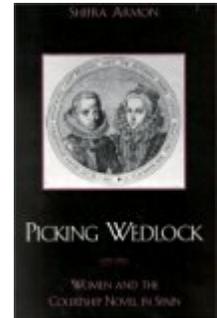


Shifra Armon. *Picking Wedlock: Women and the Courtship Novel in Spain.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. x + 231 pp. \$70.00 (cloth) ISBN 0-7425-0772-6; \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7425-0773-9.



Reviewed by Chelo de Andres Martinez

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Gendering Courtship

Picking wedlock succeeds in unlocking the impact of womens courtship narrative on genre and gender in seventeenth-century Spain. Besides presenting an excellent critical reading of three women writers of the period, *Picking wedlock* provides the means to discern socio-economic and cultural interpretations otherwise beyond the lay reader. An inviting and clear structure underlines the analysis of these novels and embeds its multiple layers of meaning. The author argues that these narratives provided courtiers, mostly female, with paradigms and strategies for advancing their social status within a stern and enclosed environment.

In Chapter 1 *Picking Wedlock* presents an interesting reading of what the author proposes to re-label as courtship novel (*novela de cortejo*), as opposed to courtly novel (*novela cortesana*), since it represents more precisely their nature: courtship stories centered on a female perspective, not love stories driven by male desire; their readership of aspiring female courtiers and those who pursued them, rather than the Court; and

their authors' intentions: pragmatic strategies to choose the best suitor, not erotic solace. While I have no objection to the new label, I remain unconvinced that it would expel those misconceptions. Certainly, as the author points out, there is no shortage of labels or categories which aspire to classify the unprecedented production of prose fictions in Golden Age Spain; many of them also exploring gender relationships. Perhaps, the scarce reference to those works, is one aspect Armon's study misses.

Despite the most cautious parents, marriage seems to have been a menacing state for women, as reflected by a myriad of stories examined in *Picking Wedlock*. The novelty of these courtship novels and their claim to be a gendered work is that they offer strategies to test suitors intentions, warn women against potential dangers (marrying abroad, the greed of husbands, etc.) and advocates a wider spectrum of life paths suitable for women. Unlike well-known conduct manuals, the courtship novel contends that tying the knot need not be the happy ending proposed by those male authored works, as Chapter 2 establishes.

Chapter 3 and 4 analyze in detail three women writers production and the literary resources they display. How they approached their work is discussed thoroughly, from the biographical circumstances that led them to writing, to the mimetic and rhetorical means they successfully employ to convey their message. These novels presented women with practical strategies such as: discretion, prudence, perseverance, dissimulation and *donaire*, enabling them to promote their interests and goals within the boundaries and constraints of seventeenth-century Spain. Lessons in self-assertion together with the anticipation of thrilling courtship stories, was the perfect recipe to make a success of these novels.

Furthermore in Chapter 5, the narratives are revealed as an encoded text presenting a particular view on imperial marriage and dynastic politics. Such an allegorical reading poses thought provoking questions that demand further research.

The Appendix, with synopses of the texts brilliantly discussed in *Picking Wedlock*, is a valuable resource that facilitates the understanding and arouse the modern readers interest in these little known narratives.

This work serves to redirect the issue of gender in literary works neglected by critics, be it on account of its modest nature among the Golden Age literary production, or because it deals with a seemingly female subject matter. *Picking Wedlock* will also appeal to those interested in popular fiction theory and motif narrative structure.

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