



March 2008

Review Text

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Recommended Citation

Nadeau, Carolyn A., "Review Text" (2008). *Scholarship*. 5.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/hispstu_scholarship/5

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Review Text

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Helen Nader, ed. *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain. Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450_1650* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004). 208 pp. ISBN 0252028686

Eric Kartchner. *Unhappily Ever After: Deceptive Idealism in Cervantes's Marriage Tales* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2005). 153 pp. ISBN 1588710750

Helen Nader's collection of essays, *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain. Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450-1650*, offers a fresh look at the role of the Mendoza women in the politics, art and society of Renaissance and Golden Age Spain. Nader begins the series of essays with the claim that "[t]he Mendoza women's visibility in their own time provides a stark contrast to the invisibility of real noblewomen in modern scholarship about golden age Spain" (2). Her collection begins to rectify that situation. The introduction clarifies the Mendoza women's history. As Nader states, "Spanish husbands specifically designated their wives as guardians, brothers assisted sisters in their political activities, sons obediently married brides chosen by their mothers, and kings openly negotiated with their female subjects in property and legal disputes" (20). Each of the eight essays that follow provides examples of exceptional women who knew how to bend the "patriarchal" rules advantageously or examples of exceptional moments in which circumstances allowed women more flexibility to administer authority.

All eight essays maintain an excellent level of research, engage the reader and stimulate further discussion of the contributions of the Mendoza women. While several essays convincingly substantiate claims, others derive their strength from secondary points developed. Grace Coolidge's essay, "Choosing Her Own Buttons: The Guardianship of Magdalena de Bobadilla", exemplifies the former. She clearly portrays how aristocratic women were involved in managing their own affairs. The article flows from Magdalena's button fetish, to health issues, discrepancies in food charges in her estate, resisting a marriage proposal, to an eventual lawsuit against her then former guardian Diego Hurtado de Mendoza. In a chapter that is engaging from start to finish, Coolidge ends by providing readers with several examples of other women who also displayed ownership in the family estates. Another solid chapter is Anne Cruz's "Willing Desire: Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza and Female Subjectivity". Cruz argues that Carvajal, a noble woman who relinquished all her wealth to live in poverty, was less motivated by a will for martyrdom and more by a desire for an autonomous subject position. Cruz weaves the complexities of politics and religion into Carvajal's personal life and exposes the parallels between Carvajal's youth and her mystic poetry. Her "desire for autonomy impelled her to break loose from her social bonds, escape familial and religious

confinement, and travel to a foreign and dangerous enemy land” (189). María Pilar Manero Sorrolla’s chapter, “On the Margins of the Mendozas: Luisa de la Cerda and María de San José (Salazar)”, offers scholars of Teresa de Ávila a fresh perspective on two women*the patron Luisa de la Cerda and the nun Sor María de San José (Salazar)*she directly influenced.

Other essays also offer excellent insights. Cristian Berco, in “Juana Pimentel, the Mendoza Family, and the Crown”, does an outstanding job explaining the *mayorazgo* institution from its inception with the beginning of the Trastámara dynasty until the 1505 *cortes de Toledo* when regulatory laws were finally laid down. The strength of Stephanie Fink de Backer’s chapter, “Rebel with a Cause: The Marriage of María Pacheco and the Formation of Mendoza Identity”, lies more in what she reveals about María Pacheco’s father, Íñigo López de Mendoza, Second Count of Tendilla, his frustrations with King Fernando, and his failed attempts to secure increased financial support from the crown, than about María herself. In discussing Tendilla’s stance on tolerating cultural practices among the Morisco population of Granada, including his decision to disregard Fernando’s decrees on promulgating Christian clothing for Morisco women, Fink de Backer pens one of my favorite lines of the collected essays: “The distance from a young lady’s armoire to the bustling streets of Granada, from family to royal policy, could be measured in just a few yards of silk” (77). Her struggles with primary resources are shared by several others in the collection and present, what I estimate to be, the most serious challenge facing the project. In “Mother Love in the Renaissance: The Princess of Éboli’s Letters to Her Favorite Son”, Helen Reed contends, successfully I think, that Ana de Mendoza defended herself and her property rights and continued to exercise some authority as a patron of the church throughout most of her imprisonment. Yet, I had hoped for more analysis of the 34 unpublished letters and imagine that Reed will have more to say on these letters in the future. Ronald Surtz’s essay, “In Search of Juana de Mendoza”, puts forth an engaging snapshot of life for aristocratic women in the late fifteenth century. María del Carmen Vaquero Serrano’s “Books in the Sewing Basket: María de Mendoza y de la Cerda” presents details of María’s tension with her mother, the foodstuffs presented as gifts and the love poetry Alvar Gómez writes her, in spite of the scant primary documentation available to scholars today.

If I had to raise a specific criticism, I would point to the recurrent and, in my view, disproportionate claims that these women “steered the direction of Mendoza politics” (44) or were “responsible for shaping . . . the destiny of Castile” (83). Such statements are both unsubstantiated and unnecessary. These women’s stories are engaging in their own right; overstating their impact is unwarranted. That said, Helen Nader and the other authors of this collection have brought to light a worthy contribution to early modern Spanish scholarship.

The first two chapters of Eric Kartchner’s *Unhappily Ever After: Deceptive Idealism in Cervantes’s Marriage Tales* serve as resources for scholars who would like to review major contributions to the concept of metafiction and to the scholarship of Cervantes’s *Exemplary Novels*. In chapter one he dissects the development of the concept of metafiction as it was first defined by William Gass in 1970, stretching back to Lionel Abel and Mikhail Bakhtin up through Robert Alter, Robert Scholes, Patricia Waugh and Mark Currie (1995). In chapter two Kartchner pays his respects to those critics who have delved into Cervantes’ *Exemplary Novels* and have influenced his own study, with particular focus on the contributions of Joaquín Casaldueiro, Ruth El Saffar, Joseph Ricapito and William Clamurro. After spending roughly a third of the monograph on the methodological approach and literary review, he launches his own dialogue with Cervantes’s idealistic *Exemplary Novels*.

Each of the subsequent five chapters takes on one of the tales and addresses ways in which self-consciousness surfaces in each of the texts. In chapter three, “*Las dos doncellas: Double Lives, Double Talk*”, Kartchner examines irony, beginning with the very title of the novella. Here he proposes that “all Cervantes’s texts are constructed with conscious and self-conscious doublings” (68), a point to which he returns in chapter five, “*La señora Cornelia: Deconstructing Romance*”, when he expands on Cervantes’s doubling and how he exposes literary and social conventions.

Perhaps the duplicity indicates that fiction is a lie, and that to create a good story, a believable story, the creator must consciously resort to deviousness. Thus, it may be that the ironic discourse simultaneously deconstructs and models idealistic fiction. We see on the one hand how a fictitious character should act, and on the other hand, how he or she does act. (105)

Kartchner really hits his stride in chapter four, “*La ilustre fregona: The World Turned Upside Down*”, where he develops fully the notion that metafiction exposes not only literary convention, but social ones as well. “Metafiction can serve as an instrument to make some kind of social statement, or at least to expose some problematic aspect concerning the configuration of society, the same way that it often exposes the artifice involved in the construction of a text” (78). As is expected from his extensive dialoguing with other critics in previous chapters, here, too, he includes explanations of how Mikhail Bakhtin, Joaquín Casaldueño, Agustín Amezúa, Ana María Barrenechea, Julio Rodríguez-Luis, Thomas Hart, Javier Herrero, Theresa Sears, Monique Joly, Stanislav Zimic, Noel Fallow, Ann Wiltrout, Laura Gorfkle, and Amy Williamson have all contributed to the reading of this work. Kartchner presents a convincing argument that Constanza’s absence is a major plot motivator. That she has no voice (and no control) is corroborated by her multiple narrators who “add details that surprise the listeners and inform the reader of particulars in the master narrative” (93). Kartchner also notes the importance of the inn as a microcosm of Spanish society, reminiscent of *Don Quixote*, I. Chapter six, “*La fuerza de la sangre: Deception and Desire*”, remains the least convincing as I disagree with what Kartchner calls “the clever decentering of the violence of the rape by both the narrator and Leocadia—a decentering that complicates and opens the interpretive possibilities” (121). While I appreciate how Luisico’s accident figures into the narrative, Rodolfo’s rape is no less central to the narrative in my view.

Kartchner’s commitment to dialogue with other critics, to expanding certain views and refuting others, is admirable. At times I wanted to hear more of Kartchner’s authorial voice, but his own self-consciousness and commitment to diverse interpretations of the texts kept him grounded in even exchanges between himself and other critics. This monograph presents a sophisticated evaluation of the state of literary criticism of Cervantes’s idealistic novellas; it is not to be missed.