

**Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero, editors: *Beyond Spain's Borders: Women Players in Early Modern National Theaters*. Routledge, 2017**

Ali Alsmadi, Indiana University Bloomington, USA.

1 In this volume of ten essays, Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero bring together valuable works examining the real and fictional women who played pivotal roles in the cultivation of early modern drama and in the theater departing from and coming into the Iberian Peninsula and other European realms. As a scholar of Spanish Golden Age Literature, I find that this collection enriches the study of drama and theater from a nontraditional perspective, where women engaged and impacted the transformations in the theatrical practices and the gendered effect of Spanish histories, legends and cultural stereotypes, especially as incorporated or adapted in the French and the English drama. The book exceeded my high expectations through the fruitful investigations it provides, restructuring to the readers a clear map of the role of women. After a perusal of the contents, these essays complement one another by drawing the evolving presence of women in the pan-European theater, especially in the tradition of Spanish *comedia* and Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Despite the editors' thematically organized units, however, each essay remains a discrete project elucidating women's experiences on both the domestic and the transnational stage. In presenting the analyses and conclusions of this volume, I shall focus my efforts on the chapters that offer the most provocative interventions in this field.

2 The main body of the book is divided into two parts that correspond to two opposite geographical crossings. In the first part, "From Spain to the Transnational Stage", the editors introduce five essays that offer articulate readings of the roles and influences of Iberian women on the stages of England, Austria, and France. The first two chapters are dedicated to tracing famous Spanish fictional characters such as *Malibea* and *La Celestina* and their domestication in the English Tudor Interludes. Chapter two focuses on the transformations of seventeenth century María de Zayas's female fictional characters in her story *Avarice Punished* that appeared in the heavy English and French translations, adaptations, and frequent borrowings in the works of Paul Scarron and Molière. The respective analyses and comparative studies of these two chapters offer the reader a profound understanding of gender and cultural practices that interplay between the stage and everyday life. For example, the first chapter elucidates the differences between the

rebellious and unconventional character of Malibea who rebels against practices of Man in the original Spanish drama and choose death over adhering to patriarchal normativity. However, the refashioning of Malibea in the English drama to appear obedient mirrors a conscious distance to the alien nature of the original text and reflects what the author describes as “mercantile humanism” (17), a sort of discursive order of educative narrative that commodified desire and legitimized the established civic norms of the English society. By the same token, chapters three, four, and five highlight the presence and the impact that Spanish princesses and queens had on royal courts and theaters of Paris and Vienna; these historical figures include María Teresa and Margarita María. These chapters reveal a concentrated interest of female playwrights in the Spanish plots and the existence of logistic royal routs that encouraged physical transference of celebrity Spanish dancers and actresses (e.g. Francisca Bezón to the courts of Louis XIV).

3 The second part of the book is invested in the contributions of foreign royal women coming from France, Austria, and Italy to create and perform foreign drama in the royal courts of Madrid that echo the cultural and theatrical practices of Paris and Vienna. In chapter seven, for instance, María Cristina Quintero delves into the lives and the contributions of different Habsburg women in bringing to Madrid their own national identity and cultural practices. What is interesting in this chapter—and recurrent in other chapters as well—is the illustrations of how the queens were both actresses and audiences to the same performances they created, as Quintero indicates: “The most important function of these spectacles was the introduction of the queen to her new subjects, and Margarita would have been the splendidly attired protagonist in this mutable performance” (133). An effective contribution of this group of articles is Ana Fernandez Valbuena’s essay “The *Commedia dell’Arte* in Spain” where she briefly discusses the influence of gender roles on and off the stage. By beginning her study with the importance of the history of the Italian *Commedia dell’Arte*, Valbuena quickly moves on to the development of this theatrical art and its transition into the Spanish market through professional companies, as in the example of the company of Stefanelo Botarga that influenced the Spanish theater of the sixteenth century (114). The highlight of this chapter is the discussion of the controversial gender performance on the Spanish stage; moral objections against women performing forced the Italian companies to use young male actors to play the female role. This gender crossing, moreover, insinuated homosexuality and ambiguity of gender. To solve this issue, a majesty decree (1587)

was needed to allow only the women who were married to actors participating in the same ensemble to perform (118).

4 The essays included in this volume should not be overlooked by teachers, students, and/or scholars interested in the role of women and the play of gender in the early modern period. One of the main strengths of this book is that it offers the readers a map of textual transferences and political cultural practices dominated by women, both fictional and real. The authors and editors of this excellent collection provide contextual, historical introductions and abundant notes that facilitate its comprehension in order to make its content available to a wide range of readers interested in gender and the woman's experience in the theater of the early modern period.