

3-2006

Review of Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity, by S. Donnell

Elizabeth Lehfeltdt

Cleveland State University, e.lehfeltdt@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Original Citation

Elizabeth A. Lehfeltdt, "Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity, by S. Donnell," *Journal of Modern History* 78 no. 1 (2006): 238-239.

Repository Citation

Lehfeltdt, Elizabeth, "Review of Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity, by S. Donnell" (2006). *History Faculty Publications*. 12.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/12

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity. By *Sidney Donnell*.

Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003. Pp. 312. \$44.50.

In *Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity*, Sidney Donnell analyzes the significance of male cross-dressing characters on the Spanish stage of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He contends that most scholars of the golden age of Spanish drama have neglected the larger significance of this feature. Donnell's goal is not simply to resurrect these intriguing figures but to plumb the depths of their cultural meaning. As he puts it, "The deployment of drag performance in these theatrical pieces tends to parody several signs of identity at the same time, revealing the social constructions (and lack of biological essence) behind gender, class, ethnicity and 'race'" (31). He argues that these examples of male transvestism can illuminate the cultural and political landscape of early modern Spain by telling us more about the traffic in women, the crisis of absolutism, the politics of theater, homosociality, and anxieties over masculinity. While this is a provocative proposal, Donnell's work falls short in two ways. First, he fails to make convincing connections between the cultural commentary contained in the plays and the historical circumstances of early modern Spain. Second, he overreaches in his analysis, weighing down male cross-dressing characters and the plays in which they appear with too much cultural baggage.

Donnell believes that Spanish audiences would have found the sight of male cross-dressing provocative. He also argues for the subversive potential of this device: for example, men who appeared as women challenged the presumed authority of men over women and the culturally sanctioned definitions of masculinity. The potential disruptiveness of this practice, in fact, led to the Spanish government's 1587 ban on men dressing as women on the stage. The interest of playwrights in employing this device—perhaps a testimony to the appeal of these characters to Spanish audiences—led to an interesting way around the ban. Rather than relying on men to play female parts, playwrights began writing roles for men that required their characters to cross-dress.

Donnell proffers various bold analyses, but they are often unsatisfactory. Chapter 3, for example, explores a late sixteenth-century play, *Comedia de los amores y locuras del conde loco* (ca. 1585), in which the protagonist, a Spanish nobleman, slowly goes mad as he is betrayed by and alienated from his absolutist ruler. As he descends into madness, the count begins to cross-dress. For Donnell, the count's "mental state becomes an expression of the pitfalls of gender essentialism through which strength becomes masculinized and weakness is feminized" (103). He further posits that the count's compromised masculinity "parallels" (138) a similar crisis facing Spain in the late sixteenth century. There are several problems with this thesis that are symptomatic of the work as a whole. The first is that Donnell does not persuasively link the issues

being tackled in the plays and historical developments in early modern Spain. In chapter 3 he sketches inadequate parallels between the madness of the play's protagonist and the madness "in the theater of Iberian history" (109). In one paragraph, Donnell rushes through a litany of Iberian insanity that includes Don Quixote, King Sebastian of Portugal, Don Carlos, and Juana la Loca. Had he grounded his historical interpretation of the count's madness in the recent work of historians, such as Sara Nalle and Bethany Aram, who have explored the social, political, and even gendered meanings of madness, his argument would have achieved greater depth and persuasiveness.

Donnell also fails in this chapter and throughout the book to make a convincing case for a crisis of masculinity in early modern Spain. While the assertion that such a crisis existed is probably accurate and an analysis of it would be a welcome addition to the gender history of Spain, Donnell fails to marshal the evidence to prove it. He suggests that by the 1580s there was "debate inside the country over the nation's perceived feminization at the height of the Spanish Habsburgs' imperial expansion" (47) but seems himself to equate femininity with weakness. Anytime the monarchy faltered or overextended itself (and it is debatable whether or not Philip II was really doing either in the 1580s), Donnell reads this as a crisis of masculinity that contributed to the country's "feminized self-image" (45). When he delves into the seventeenth century—a period in which his contention might be expected to bear more fruit—he again fails to take advantage of both primary sources (the writings of moralists and others) and secondary sources (Antonio Feros, Paul Allen, and Ruth Mackay, for example) that would enhance his argument about a crisis of masculinity and expand his grounding in recent work on seventeenth-century Spanish history.

Beyond his attempts to situate these plays in their historical context, Donnell's work also disappoints because it is too ambitious. Donnell enthusiastically contends that these plays and their cross-dressing male characters can speak to us about questions of gender, class, and ethnic identity. While this is the well-rehearsed triad of cultural studies, and invariably they are categories that cannot be examined in isolation from one another, Donnell would have done better to confine himself more closely to the study of gender identity. In his discussion of Lope de Rueda's *Comedia Medora*, for example, he successfully demonstrates that a cross-dressing male character disrupts social and cultural assumptions about the ability of men to control the behavior of women. But then he gets carried away, turning his attention to another of the play's characters, who "wishes to cross the barriers of his class and ethnic origins, not necessarily those of masculine and feminine identities" (88). In his haste to analyze the plays, Donnell also neglects frequently to explain their basic plots. This deficiency will make it difficult for him to gain an audience among those not well-versed in Spanish drama.

Donnell's work is thought-provoking and contains important observations, but these successes are overshadowed by his inadequate grasp of recent work in Spanish history and a tendency to try to do too much. Had he simply confined his thesis to a careful articulation of the cultural meaning of male cross-dressing on the Spanish stage—an area in which he clearly has expertise—and shied away from making broader connections to the imperial stage of Spanish political history, the work would have been much stronger.

ELIZABETH LEHFELDT

Cleveland State University