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## **Review of A Wild Country Out in the Garden: The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun, edited and translated by K.A. Myers and A. Powell, and Persephone's Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature, by M.L. Welles**

Elizabeth Lehfelddt  
Cleveland State University, [e.lehfelddt@csuohio.edu](mailto:e.lehfelddt@csuohio.edu)

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Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, eds. and trans., *A Wild Country Out in the Garden: The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. 408 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 0-253-33581-7.

Marcia L. Welles, *Persephone's Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature*

Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000. 272 pp. \$20.95. ISBN: 0-8265-1351-4.

At first glance these two works would seem to have little in common. Kathleen Myers and Amanda Powell offer a translation and analysis of the spiritual diaries of a seventeenth-century Mexican nun. Marcia Welles presents a provocative re-reading of golden-age Spanish literature, focusing on narratives of rape and how these narratives shape the internal structure and meaning of these texts. Yet while presenting little in terms of similarities, the juxtaposition of the two books sparks a consideration of the dialogue between literary texts and historical context. Both books are trying to illuminate features of the Hispanic world of the seventeenth century. But they do so in very different ways — each testing the extent to which the texts of the past mirror the world that produced them.

Myers and Powell introduce readers to the life of María de San José (1656-1719). After a brief introduction they present extensive translated passages of María's multi-volume spiritual diaries. Following the translation are two analytical essays, "María de San José's World" and "Gender, Tradition, and Autobiographical Spiritual Writings." This organizational structure is noteworthy. Most edited translations put all of the explanatory and analytical materials first. Myers and Powell offer their audience the opportunity to read the diaries first, pondering them, and then coming to their own conclusions. And there is much to ponder in these pages. María's diaries describe her fascinating and often harrowing spiritual journey. At an early age María received terrifying visions of the Devil who told her, "You are mine. You will not escape my clutches" (15). Simultaneously flooded by spiritual doubts and the desire to live a life of perfection, the adolescent María subjected herself to harsh bodily mortifications such as sleeping on the floor, abstaining from certain foods (she vowed to eat only greens and corn tortillas), and wearing a self-fashioned hairshirt. She dedicated herself to rigorous prayerful devotion, frequently retreating to a former chicken-coop for privacy. She received divine approbation of her efforts in visions and spiritual gifts, including the miraculous granting of the ability to read. Her religious profession as an Augustinian Recollect brought her tremendous solace, but also new burdens. She continued to receive frightening visions, including one of tormented souls in purgatory. Yet at the same time, she was comforted by divine visions and communications in which God assured her that "having Me, you can do great things" (83). Eventually María would be entrusted with founding a new convent and becoming its novice director. This brief summary cannot begin to do justice to the richness of these diaries. They include a wealth of insights into such areas as visionary spirituality, convent politics, and attitudes towards native populations.

In the final two chapters the authors provide their own readings of the text. And their analysis regards María's diaries as a window onto a host of social, cultural,

and religious issues. The authors use the diaries to reconstruct the external world of María's criollo family, including their attitudes towards María's call to a religious vocation. They also tease out from the details of María's comments a fuller sense of the hierarchy, spatial boundaries, and social meaning of colonial convents. Finally, they also provide an enlightening commentary on the inner world of María's extraordinary visions and spiritual travails, and where these fit into the European and colonial traditions of female spirituality.

At the same time, however, Myers and Powell are very attentive to how María chose to tell her story. As much as they regard the diaries as a way of gaining access to the world of seventeenth-century Mexico, they also recognize them as constructed texts which impose a particular kind of order or narrative on the past. In the final essay, then, they turn to an insightful exploration of how María recorded the story of her life. Here they reveal, for example, that María borrowed passages from other spiritual texts — a customary practice through which authors found their "place among the community of saints and blessed souls" (308). Yet María still shaped the telling of her story. Particularly in her attempts to "deal with the mediating male influence [of her confessors] on her writing and ideas" (324), María employed deliberate narrative and rhetorical strategies, such as emphasizing her role as a paragon of the Church's Counter-Reformation ideology. For Myers and Powell, then, María's diaries serve the external purpose of illuminating the distant past, yet they also analyze how internal textual dynamics determine the character of this illumination.

Marcia Welles approaches her texts differently. For her, the play (or the story) is the thing. Isolating the disturbing, yet frequently fundamental, rape narratives that appear in golden-age Spanish literature she seeks to understand the meaning and use of these narratives in shaping the unfolding of these dramas. Welles's methodology is wide-ranging and includes a heavy reliance on psychoanalytic and anthropological theory. She also ranges freely from medieval to modern texts (Jane Campion's movie *The Piano*, for example). While this approach may trouble some readers, it does allow her to make intriguing observations. She finds that "the motif of rape joins these three realms — myth, history, and politics . . . wherein the woman's body becomes the object of exchange — between kings, with national and international consequences, or simply between men, with merely domestic repercussions" (7). The strength of the work lies in her provocative exploration of these consequences and repercussions and what they can tell us about the internal meanings created by the rape narratives.

Thus, for example, Welles's analysis reveals the enormous power of female sexuality — and its exploitation — to shape the political discourse of golden-age Spanish dramas. It is the fetishization of Lucrecia's chastity in Rojas Zorilla's *Lucrecia y Tarquino* that serves as the catalyst for political violence. Welles argues that the gendering of violence as female in Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*, rather than simply underscoring the irrationality of mob violence, instead makes this violence possible. If violence had been gendered as male in the play it would have to answer to "legal, moral, and psychological consequences" (91) that would complicate matters, and, as Welles suggests, might have been disconcerting for the play's audiences.

Overall, then, Welles reassesses the mix of politics and sexuality that control the internal dynamics of this literature. At the same time, however, Welles also wants to see these dramas as a mirror of the social and political world of seventeenth-century Spain. It is here that the work falters somewhat. Welles hints at the connections between stage and society, but they remain largely implicit, speculative, or undeveloped. She raises various questions, for example, about the reception of these plays and how the audiences would have reacted to these rape narratives and the attitudes towards gender and sexuality that they reflect. Welles never acknowledges the inherently speculative nature of such an analysis. Such speculations might be more persuasive if Welles had provided a greater historical context that might represent the prevailing social and cultural attitudes that undoubtedly shaped audience reactions. She often hints at this context, suggesting that the rape narratives in these plays mirror the class conflict, obsession with honor, and regulation of female sexuality that are characteristic of the era. Welles's suggestions are right on target and these are certainly features of seventeenth-century Spanish society. Yet at the same time her comments remain suggestive and she never explores them fully with the weight of the necessary secondary bibliography behind her — thus she misses the opportunity to open more of a dialogue between history and literary studies. She is most attentive to the historical and legal context for these rape narratives in the Afterword. Integrating this material into her text would make her arguments more convincing.

While employing very different methodologies, each of these books contributes to our knowledge of the seventeenth-century Hispanic world. Myers and Powell have presented a well-rounded re-creation of a text and its external and internal dynamics. Welles's work is less complete in this regard, but it certainly raises important questions about the relationship between history and literature that should inspire future investigations.

ELIZABETH A. LEHFELDT  
Cleveland State University