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Review of The Comedia of Virginity: Mary and the Politics of Seventeenth-Century Spanish Theater

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The Comedia of Virginity: Mary and the Politics of Seventeenth Century Spanish Theater.

By MIRZAM C. PÉREZ. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. ix, 173 pp. Cloth, \$39.95.

Mirzam Pérez's *The Comedia of Virginity: Mary and the Politics of Seventeenth Century Spanish Theater* explores three little known comedias from seventeenth century Spain with an eye toward understanding their impact on the cultural discourse about the Virgin Mary in this period. The book includes some insightful observations and analyses but fails to deliver on the promise of its overall argument.

The first three chapters examine a lesser known work, *La limpieza no manchada* (1618), by the famous playwright Félix Lope de Vega. This comedia was unusual for its subject matter the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception and its commissioning it was sought by the University of Salamanca for performance in that city. All of this is quite intriguing. It is helpful to learn more about Lope's oeuvre, and it is also useful to shift the analysis of the comedia to smaller cities outside Madrid and Seville. The analysis of the play and its significance, however, falls a bit short. The protagonist who debates the Virgin's immaculate conception in the play is Saint Bridget. Pérez never explores why Saint Bridget would have been Lope's choice, saying simply that Bridget enjoyed an "extraordinary relationship to divinity" (p. 27). Inexplicably, her argument about Saint Bridget is buried in an endnote. Her examination of this comedia includes a study of the festival book that was prepared to commemorate its performance and related festivities. She argues persuasively that the festival book maps the sacred space of the city, leaving out, for example, the religious foundations of the anti immaculist Dominicans. Yet she could do much more with this analysis. She speaks of the festival book's "readers" but never explains who they might have been. In other words, who are the significant mes sages of this text for?

The fourth chapter is the strongest, though Pérez does not fully develop her argument. Here she examines Angela de Azevedo's *Dicha y desdicha del juego y devocio'n de la Virgen* (ca. 1640) (Pérez does not provide English translations of the titles of the plays she examines). As a play by a female author that champions a strong maternal role for the Virgin and that was probably intended to both exemplify and bolster the power of the queen, Isabel of Bourbon, this is a rich text. A deeper immersion in the gender debates of the period and their recent examination by historians would enhance Pérez's points and lend credence to her assertion that Azevedo has crafted a "matriarchy" in this play (p. 79). She also contends that Azevedo is an important female voice, privy to the machinations and crises in the Hapsburg court at this time. Situating Azevedo within the historical milieu of Spain's perceived decline and through the commentary of other female writers like Mari'a de Guevara would help further highlight her significance. The strongest part of this chapter is Pérez's analysis of the deployment of the visual arts in the play. She argues convincingly that Azevedo uses rich descriptive passages to place her own stamp on questions of the iconography of the Virgin Mary.

Chapter 5 looks at a third play, Agustín Moreto y Cabana's *Santa Rosa del Peru* (1669). This play allows Pérez to extend her argument to an examination of the role played by female saints and the Virgin Mary in consolidating and legitimizing Spain's overseas empire. Unlike in her examinations of Lope de Vega and Angela de Azevedo, Pérez includes no biographical information about Moreto y Cabana. Given her assertions about the play's role in Spanish hegemony, it would be helpful to know more about his background and his oeuvre. The bulk of the chapter examines the cult of Saint Rose of Lima; even the figure of the Virgin Mary plays a decidedly smaller role in this chapter, making it an awkward fit with the analysis of the two previous plays.

This is not a book for the nonspecialist. For example, Pérez never defines or explains the *comedia*. Lacking an understanding of this literary form and its performance spaces will make it difficult to appreciate the broader significance of Pérez's arguments. This is unfortunate because I think it will cost the author readers interested more broadly in the cult of the Virgin Mary and early modern theater. There are also a few errors that limit the study, such as identifying Thomas Aquinas as the founder of the Dominican Order (p. 11).

The *Comedia of Virginity*, as noted above, has some valuable insights to offer the scholar of seventeenth century Spanish theater. Greater attention to detail and the complexity of arguments, however, would make this a stronger work.

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