

The Problems and Promises of Early Modern Gender Studies:

The Case of Spain

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In the past year, I have given more thought than ever before to the state of early modern gender studies and, more specifically, to the position of Spanish studies within the broader fields of women's literature and history. Some of these thoughts, as one might imagine, have not been particularly optimistic. At a time when we are seeing large quantities of influential books, monographs, and articles on women in early modern Spain, specialists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods of other European countries continue to give short shrift to this research. This oversight has far-reaching consequences, not the least of which is that peninsular scholarship tends to exist in isolation from work on the rest of western Europe. I have heard colleagues in English, for example, claim that European women only wrote closet drama and never wrote anything that might have been destined for the stage in the early modern period. Others proclaim late seventeenth-century English writer Mary Astell the first European feminist. Similar to discussions about the invention of the novel in eighteenth-century England, these claims do little to further our understanding of the development of feminist thought or the scope of European women's literary history. Moreover, the slight attention paid to peninsular research compounds the difficulties of publishing in the field, as the number of presses interested in Spanish studies has diminished over the past two decades.[\[1\]](#)

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To explore how we might influence future directions of the field of research on early modern Hispanic women *and* deal with some obstacles we currently face, I would like to be guided by the ideas about friendship, equality, and market economies present in the following sonnet, which was written by Sor Violante do Ceo (1601-93) for her friend Doña Bernarda Ferreira:

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Belisa, el amistad es un tesoro
tan digno de estimarse eternamente,
que a su valor no es paga suficiente
de Arabia y Potosí la plata y oro.
Es la amistad un lícito decoro
que se guarda en lo ausente y lo presente,
y con que de un amigo el otro siente
la tristeza, el pesar, la risa, el lloro.
No se llama amistad la que es violenta,
si no la que es conforme simpatía,
de quien lealtad hasta la muerte ostenta:
Esta la amistad es que hallar querría,
ésta la que entre amigas se sustenta,
y ésta, Belisa, en fin, la amistad mía.[\[2\]](#)

Sor Violante casts friendship as the fruits of collaboration, as a meaningful end product of emotional commitment; something not unlike, I would suggest, the relationship of many critics to their research on early modern women. Indeed, in its exploration of mutual reliance, economic markets, and ideological commitment, Sor Violante's sonnet evokes factors directly related to research in the field of women's literary history.

I. Collaboration and Readership

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*Es la amistad un lícito decoro
que se guarda en lo ausente, y lo presente [. . .].*

Sor Violante's evocation of absence and empathy speaks to our endeavors as scholars. Even though we tend to work in isolation, we write for each other, united in the common endeavor of recovering women's literary history. The decisions each of us makes--about which article to write, whose texts to teach, and which theories we find useful--impact the collective state of our field.

Indeed, the decisions we have made along the way now have a history of their own. In the early years of feminism, we saw a lot of work concentrated on a few women authors. Recently we have seen a wider variety of research informed by a broader range of methodologies. Zayas and Sor Juana are both good examples of authors who have been studied heavily through many theoretical lenses (i.e. various feminisms, Marxism, deconstruction, narratology), and now we are seeing more comparative work done on them in conjunction with other women.^[3] As research on these women attests, the broadening of the disciplines has progressed over the last three decades to include many theoretical approaches to a diverse group of writers.

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In spite of the boom in women's studies over the past few decades, somehow work on Spanish women remains a little out of step with the other early modern fields. Colleagues putting together panels and books on Europe continue to overlook Spain. Often, one essay or presentation on Spain suffices for coverage of the Hispanic world. This tokenism raises an issue that scholars in women's studies have been aware of for a long time: the division between peninsular and Latin American studies often functions as an impediment to understanding the pre-nineteenth century Hispanic world. Efforts to break down this disciplinary boundary have only been slow to make an impact. In fact, the Asociación de Escritoras de España y América (1300-1800) did not adopt interdisciplinarity as the organizing rubric of the annual conference until 2001.^[4]

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While the Latin American vs. Peninsular split keeps us from studying early modern and colonial women's literary history as part of one large, albeit complex, field, the existing divisions in Golden Age studies impede the incorporation of women's writing into the larger discussions about Spain's literary history. Poetry experts, comediantes, cervantistas, and others meet annually to discuss their particular genres and canonical authors, yet these sub-divisions do not allow for a full integration of women's writing. How, for example, do letters, diaries, and Inquisition trials fit into our existing organizational schema for Golden Age scholars in this country? What existing venues do we have for discussion about the dozens, if not hundreds, of nuns whose biographies and autobiographies have yet to be studied? I would suggest that we need to break down some of the disciplinary walls that keep us from talking to each other about the cultural production of men and women in the period in question. Indeed, a serious re-evaluation of our persistent commitment to small sub-disciplines is in order if we want to continue to revitalize early modern Spanish studies.^[5]

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II. The Economics of Writing: The Book Market

Sor Violante calls friendship "un tesoro tan digno de estimarse que a su valor no es paga suficiente de Arabia y Potosí la plata y oro." This reference to value within a market economy has powerful connections to current concerns about the academic book market. With the increase in the pressure to publish in the last two decades has also come, as we all know, a decrease not in the numbers of titles published by university presses but, instead, a decrease in the numbers of books purchased by libraries. Publishers cannot count on a book selling 1,000 copies. With these diminished sales has come the pressure to publish profitable books only. Among those who have gotten squeezed are those of us working in non-contemporary, non-English fields, particularly in a field seen as having a readership as small as that of peninsular studies.

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Everyone from highly accomplished senior scholars to new assistant professors knows something about this. There are some problems that cut across disciplines, of course: institutions undervalue translations and critical editions, collaborative work receives little credit in the humanities, and edited volumes garner few rewards vis-à-vis tenure and promotion. The problem is compounded within early peninsular studies because work on early modern Spain gets lumped into the general category of unmarketable books. Thus many authors turn to smaller university presses or subsidized publishing houses that, within the larger university community, carry less prestige than the major university presses.

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Rather than bemoan the realities of the market-driven publishing industry, it behooves us to take responsibility for the situation by re-examining our own research topics and taking the initiative to eliminate the problem. There is *some* good news on this front. More and more dissertations encompass transatlantic, multi-author, or thematic topics. I think this will make for marketable books for pre-tenure professors. The appearance of the University of Illinois's "Hispanisms" series adds another important venue to the already extant romance language series and to the list of presses that have supported work in the field over the past decade when others dropped peninsular studies altogether. Moreover, new translations *and* bilingual editions of Hispanic women's writing have helped increase the accessibility of primary texts beyond the Spanish speaking audience.[\[6\]](#)

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One way to think about the future of early modern gender studies is in terms of what we can do to gain control over the publishing situation. We need to continue to incorporate more women's writing, and need to think more and more about women as historical subjects. Researchers have taken on this task, and recent books by Anne Cruz, Mary Giles, Stephanie Merrim, and Sherry Velasco confirm that wide-reaching, excellent research continues to emerge from the field.[\[7\]](#) We can continue to reach beyond the strictly literary focus of our training to look more intensely at letters, diaries, and Inquisition cases. This is being done, too, and the rewards are plentiful, as it is helping us round out our understanding of women's creative production and daily lives in the period.

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The constraints on our research need to be considered, though. Scarce training in paleography, particularly among literary critics, threatens to adversely affect the growth of early modern women's studies. The renewal of the NEH Paleography Institute at the Newberry Library should help make a dent in this problem, but universities need to take the initiative to train literature and history students better in this regard. Another major constraint is that our work remains somewhat isolated from other fields. I believe that we have an obligation to our students and to the field to direct marketable and publishable dissertations, and to

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think and talk more about the marketability of our projects. This might even mean simply trying to publish in interdisciplinary journals more frequently. This path has been paved, as there are many fine examples of crossover work--such as *Untold Sisters* by Electa Arenal, Stacey Schlau, and Amanda Powell--that have become necessary reading for anyone (not just Hispanists) interested in women's writing.

The future is not bleak, by any means. It is heartening to see the diversity of dissertation topics. It is also heartening to see so many peers continue to collaborate, translate, and edit volumes in spite of the disincentives for such work. Plus, many jobs advertise for expertise in gender studies, feminist theory, and cultural studies--areas that relate to the research that many of us do. 12

We now stand at a crossroads. Those of us who study women in Spain are in a field that remains marginal to the rest of early modern European studies. But we work with amazing texts and study extraordinary life stories. We work on a country whose past is deeply imbricated in the issues of diversity that so impact debates in our own country today. Our challenge lies in figuring out how to better communicate with those who work just beyond our field. In this regard, perhaps a more vibrant future lies in interdisciplinarity. It certainly lies in scholarship that is both aware of the past influences and open to a more expansive future. 13

I'd like to believe that the contours of that future match Sor Violante's expression of contendedness at the end of her sonnet: 14

*Esta la amistad es que hallar querría,
ésta la que entre amigas se sustenta,
y ésta, Belisa, en fin, la amistad mía.*

If we continue to brainstorm about how to better integrate our research into related disciplines, I believe that our articles will find a place in comparative volumes and journals, and our books will find homes with more presses. We will continue to build a larger readership beyond our immediate discipline. This integration will better allow the Hispanic women we study to be read and considered in conjunction with their contemporaries from across the continents. It will help them be appreciated for the aspects that they share with other women of their own period *and* for the unique qualities that distinguish them from other writers. *Ésta es la amistad que hallar querría*--because more balanced and better integrated research on early modern gender studies will enrich everyone's understanding of women's literature and history. 15

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Notes

[1] Even the recent Oxford Press teaching volume on *Feminism and Renaissance Studies* almost completely overlooks Spain and the New World (*Feminism and Renaissance Studies*. Ed. Lorna Hutson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Most obviously missing from the volume are Spain and the New World, which appear only in Stephanie Jed's excellent article, "The Tenth Muse: Gender, Rationality, and the Marketing of Knowledge." Yet even Jed offers a disclaimer about the breadth of her piece, indicating that hers is a theoretical reflection on women writers and "not an essay on Anne Bradstreet and Sor Juana" (120). As to the diminishing numbers of presses interested in peninsular studies, witness the demise of the Penn State series in romance languages and literatures, as well as the dropping of

peninsular studies from many university press lists.

[2] *Tras el espejo la musa escribe: lírica femenina de los Siglos de Oro*, ed. Julián Olivares and Elizabeth Boyce (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1993), p. 271. The dedication to Ferreira remains likely, but unconfirmed. While Sor Violante cannot be considered a Spanish author strictly speaking, I include her here because she wrote both in Castilian and Portuguese and because she was born during the period of Spain's annexation of Portugal.

[3] Most comparative articles on Zayas place her alongside Sor Juana, Ana Caro, or Mariana de Carvajal, although Josephine Donovan has delineated a genealogy of European women novella writers that culminates with Zayas ("Women and the Framed-Novelle: A Tradition of Their Own," *Signs* 22.4 [1997], pp. 947-80).

[4] The theme for the 2001 AEEA conference at Georgetown University was "Más allá de las fronteras." See <http://www.gettysburg.edu/~rrosas/aeaa/> for more information on the organization.

[5] The energetic state of early modern Spanish studies was hailed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2 February 2001) in a piece about "The New Geography of Classic Spanish Literature." In case we had any doubt as to the role of women's studies in this new geography, the article featured an inset on Zayas entitled "Rediscovering the Racy Fiction of a 17th-Century Spanish Woman" (p. A15).

[6] Recent translations of women's texts include: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *La respuesta/The Answer*, ed. Electa Arenal and trans. Amanda Powell (NY: Feminist Press, 1994); María de Zayas's *The Enchantments of Love*, trans. H. Patsy Boyer (Berkeley: U California P, 1989) and *The Disenchantments of Love*, trans. H. Patsy Boyer (Albany: State University of New York P, 1997); Zayas's play, *La traición en la amistad/Friendship Betrayed*, ed. Valerie Hegstrom and trans. Catherine Larson (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1999); Catalina de Erauso's *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*, trans. Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto (Boston: Beacon, 1996); and *Viva al Siglo, Muerta al Mundo. Selected Works by María de San Alberto, 1568-1640*, ed. Stacey Schlau (New Orleans: UP of the South, 1998).

[7] Excellent critical studies on Spanish women include: Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in their own Works* (Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1989); Marina S. Brownlee, *The Cultural Labyrinth of María de Zayas* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2000); Anne Cruz, *Discourses of Poverty: Social Reform and the Picaresque Novel in Early Modern Spain* (Toronto: U Toronto P, 1999); Mary Giles, ed. *Women in the Inquisition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); Margaret R. Greer, *María de Zayas Tells Tales of Love and the Cruelty of Men* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 2000); Stephanie Merrim, *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1999); Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990); and Sherry Velasco, *The Lieutenant Nun* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2000).