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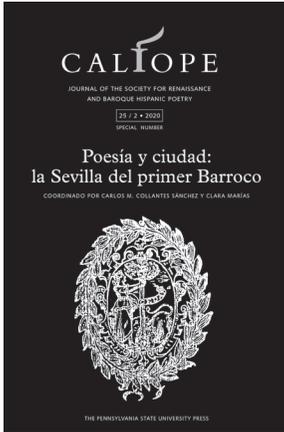
SPECIAL NUMBER

## Poesía y ciudad: la Sevilla del primer Barroco

COORDINADO POR CARLOS M. COLLANTES SÁNCHEZ Y CLARA MARÍAS



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# CALÍOPE

25 - 2 - 2020

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Poetry and city: the Seville of the first Baroque

**CARLOS M. COLLANTES SÁNCHEZ Y CLARA MARÍAS**

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ANNA DZIAŁAK-SZUBIŃSKA

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There is a brief conclusion that, with its discussion of translations, religious writers, court musicians and other topics, fails to bring the disparate chapters together into a cohesive whole. Nevertheless, there is a good—perhaps even important—book struggling to get out from under the repetition, awkward phrasing, and confusing organization. Those interested in the topic of patronage will find new and useful information in this study. One can only wish that the author had been better served by her editors.

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*Escritoras monjas. Autoridad y autoría en la escritura conventual femenina de los Siglos de Oro*  
by Julia Lewandowska.

Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2019. HB.  
534 pp. ISBN: 978-84-9192-046-5.

ANNA DZIAŁAK-SZUBIŃSKA  
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*Escritoras monjas. Autoridad y autoría en la escritura conventual femenina de los Siglos de Oro* is a study authored by Julia Lewandowska. The book was awarded an honorable mention by Victoria Urbano Prize for the best monographic book and it truly deserved the recognition. What was conceived as a part of a PhD Program founded by the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP), goes far beyond the national boundaries to give us all a powerful, deepened account of the women's writing in convents of the Early Modern Spain, such as during the Spanish Golden Age.

While we read, we encounter several female religious authors and their work as Julia Lewandowska handily guides us along the cloisters and through the literary space of the Early Modern Spanish convents, showing us how women writers would try to win their agency *intra* and *extramuros* and fought, “with a quill in hand,” for “a space on their own,” foregrounding their intellectual empowerment under challenging circumstances. With deep care, Lewandowska not only addresses the questions of authorship and authority within the conventual context, but she also makes an attempt at analyzing rhetorical models used by women writers to prove that they indeed deserve to be called “authors.” Additionally, Lewandowska draws an accurate social and historical panorama conducive to make us, as readers, understand the texts in question. This can happen, Lewandowska claims, since it is not enough simply to *rescue* the exceptional women of the past. Rather, we need to approach them right

within the historical and cultural contexts capturing the original circumstances in which their texts were conceived. “Women aren’t enough” as Allen J. Frantzen once stated (“When Women Aren’t Enough.” *Speculum*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1993, pp. 445–471).

The book consists of three generous chapters followed by detailed biographical notes of writers whose works constituted the analyzed corpus. In the first chapter, entitled “¿Cómo acercarse a los textos de autoría femenina de la alta edad moderna?” Lewandowska addresses the question of authority and authorship in terms of women’s writing and within the context of the Early Modern Period, including the book market—both print and manuscripts. She also focuses on paratexts, namely dedication, prologue, caveat and other elements such as privileges, but also on censorship issues (both ecclesiastical and statewide, as well as self-censorship of writers conscious of risks), which she later uses to shed some light on how female writers negotiate their status. She also names numerous methodological perspectives to be accommodated for her research such as: cultural history (Roger Chartier, Caroline Walker-Bynum and others), dialogical perspective (Iris M. Zavala and M. Díaz-Diocaretz), gender studies (authors such as Joan Scott), and the women’s writing approach (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and others). Examining the scope hinted at in the very title, we can observe that in this chapter Lewandowska prepares ground to discuss “*autoridad y autoría*”—authorship and authority—which gain relevance precisely in the modern era. Still, she is sensitive enough to point out she maneuvers within the female-monastic context of “double alterity,” which begs for a *customized* approach. The chapter offers, therefore, a useful and comprehensive methodological reference. Though the work mingles in between gender studies and herstory, as well as literary studies, book history and cultural history, we are not overwhelmed: it is a well-structured, persuasive study. Moreover, this chapter manages not to commit *the original sin*, one of bias and anachronisms. What merits a mention is that in one of her numerous papers, Lewandowska (“Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y la crítica literaria feminista: controversias y contribuciones.” *Itinerarios*, vol. 15, 2012, pp. 43–66) has discussed anachronistic interpretations of Early Modern women’s writing, namely the work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, which proves that Lewandowska’s approach is mature and conscious.

The second chapter, entitled “Condiciones de recepción y producción literarias” addresses numerous questions related to the historical and cultural contexts of Early Modern Spain, such as religiosity; women’s place according to the legal system; theology and *imaginarium*; valid models of conduct and finally, literary position of women. Although the historical context traced on the initial pages might could have been a bit richer in detail, this part of the book offers a useful reference in terms of literary production. Also, it nicely contextualizes the female authorship and its reception. We can learn much about the

literary creation of Early Modern Spain, namely the phenomenon of erudite *Latinas* and literary circles back in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and further *domestication* following the Council of Trent, which *cloistered* female literary production. Further, we are provided with information about the female monasticism, which attention is attached especially to the post-Tridentine context and the House of Habsburg but also to the daily life, activities, rules and so forth within the cloister. What we learn helps us see how and why the literary production was not only possible but also prolific behind the cloister gate. Lewandowska draws an image of a perfect nun according to normative texts and *exempla*—obedient, pure and humble—just to confront us with satirical texts exposing quite the contrary, and showing that the cloister life had indeed very many shades. One ambiguous aspect, according to the study, was precisely the literary activity developed in various circumstances—*por mandato*—for the use inside the monastery or outside, for a private use or to be widely read, representing various genres, written—sometimes—by very talented authors, struggling with censorship—institutional and self-imposed.

The third chapter, “Práctica literaria” is a relevant analysis of literary activity. This is where women’s voices are literally heard because it examines a body of texts, some of which have been little known among scholars up till now, written by *escritoras monjas*. First we are presented with a concept of “hybrid literature” and Lewandowska follows here into the footsteps of Nieves Baranda Leturio as well as María Carmen Marín Pina. She talks about how the conventual literature escapes classification—apart from defined genres such as poetry, dialogues or chronicles—there are examples of spiritual autobiographies, which, in fact, blend together various genres. She also points out that, although nuns enjoyed better education opportunities than any other contemporary women, they received no formal education that could put their literary talents more into some frame. The “hybrid literature” was, thus, their response to the literary models, educational contexts and, sometimes, a refuge of liberty. As Lewandowska states, we need to look closer at paratexts, an important vehicle of rhetorical strategies applied to negotiate the authorial position and to impose authority, when at the same time one would act in line with normative rules imposing obedience and humility. Hence, Lewandowska focuses not only on the literary works themselves, but also on their “surroundings and outskirts,” all things considered traditionally “less” literary: prologues, dedications, letters and so forth. The chapter boosts our understanding of rhetorical strategies as it discusses five different argumentative models used to defend a female right to write and to exercise authority: *argumentum ad verecundiam*, *argumentum ad feminam*, *argumentum ad auditorem*, *argumentum ad experientiam*, *argumentum ad divinam voluntatem*. Lewandowska evokes the tradition and legitimacy based on Teresian references, the feminine strength and lineage, by referring to Saint Anne and Mary, as well as prophetic experiences or divine inspiration among

others. Each strategy is attributed with examples of works. As Lewandowska insists, some models are more adequate to specific texts. For example, *argumentum ad experientiam* is used within the mystical context, while *argumentum ad auditorem* is more frequent in the conventual theater. According to Lewandowska, the models normally use different repertoire of topoi and formulas. She also points to ways that the female authorship may get “delegitimized” in the “deauthorization” process, which leads to the elimination of female authority and authorship and to the exceptionalization of the literary production through *rara avis* or *hic mulier* topoi that some authors had to face.

Another feature of the book is biographical notes that are structured according to five argumentative models. This handy tool should be a matter of future research. Importantly, Lewandowska opens an invitation to the community of scholars from various disciplines to build on her study. In fact, when one looks at initial folios of Bernarda Ferreira de Lacerda’s *Hespaña Libertada* (1618), it seems this acclaimed Portuguese author goes for very similar rhetorical maneuvers as *escritoras monjas*, but embedded within the secular context. Likewise, de Lacerda is portrayed as *rara avis* of the Portuguese letters, called “Tenth Muse and Forth Grace” (Anónio de Sousa de Macedo *Flores de España, Excelencias de Portugal*. Lisboa, Jorge Rodrigues, 1631, 235v). Far from rushing to precipitated conclusions, I believe it is worth employing Lewandowska’s approach within the Iberian Peninsula and in a wider European context. The methodological basis for the study and its scope are, in fact, so rich that the book should be of a particular interest to historians, literary historians and cultural studies scholars interested in the Early Modern Iberian context. Lewandowska herself insists on the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary investigations amenable to more sophisticated research.

Yet what I have found special about this book is articulated in the *nota bene* section, where Lewandowska unveils more personal details and a very *her* attitude towards this project. She not only addresses the question of female production within the conventual context looked at from an interdisciplinary perspective, but she also embraces a very *tender* approach towards her subject. As a compatriot of 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature, Olga Tokarczuk, I cannot help but put in line that particular approach with the one told us about in the Nobel Lecture when Tokarczuk introduced “The Tender Narrator” (“Nobel Lecture”). Lewandowska appears such a “tender narrator,” too, or, in other words, a “tender scholar” who looks at *escritoras monjas* with understanding and empathy, trying to figure out their intellectual and social contexts, but also to discover and uncover their needs and desires, sharing all she has learned with admiration. At the same time, none of the rules of academic *decorum* is unobserved. That is why this book must be read comprehensively. Academia needs more of such “tender scholars.”

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