

FELICIANA ENRÍQUEZ DE GUZMÁN, ANA CARO  
MALLÉN, AND SOR MARCELA DE SAN FÉLIX

# Women Playwrights of Early Modern Spain



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## Introduction

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The plays included in the present volume exemplify the ingenuity and creativity of Spain's early modern women playwrights. Like other women writers, these playwrights engaged many of the same topics as their male counterparts, but often did so with a focus on strong female protagonists<sup>1</sup>—female protagonists who act with significant agency, complexity, and dimensionality.<sup>2</sup> This fresh perspective sometimes takes those familiar with early modern theater by surprise: these women playwrights put a twist on many common themes. Their texts explore all aspects of love, both religious and profane. Their work explores the social, cultural, and religious norms and changes of their day, and does so both with humor and finesse.

Until recently, few Spanish women writers were known to exist. This volume brings three of those writers to English-speaking audiences. The playwrights featured here have been chosen for the diversity of audience, genre, and style they represent. Spanning the time period covered by theater's Golden Age, they lived and wrote between 1569 and 1687. Two lived outside the convent and one within; all three were born into privilege, which afforded them access to education.

These women also lived in a time of political turbulence and social change. The Habsburg Empire extended throughout Iberia, Europe, Asia, and the Americas; it was indeed an empire upon which the sun never set. The spoils of the

1. Most critics agree that these playwrights depict strong female protagonists. See, for example, Fernando Doménech, "Autoras en el teatro español. Siglos XVI y XVII," in *Autoras en la historia del teatro español (1500–1994)*, ed. Juan Antonio Hormigón, vol. 1 (Madrid: Asociación de directores de escena españoles, 1996), 392–604; Teresa Ferrer Valls, "La ruptura del silencio: Mujeres dramaturgas en el siglo XVII," in *Mujeres: Escrituras y lenguajes (en la cultura latinoamericana y española)*, ed. Sonia Mattalía and Milagros Aleza (Valencia: Universitat de València, 1995), 91–108; Catherine Larson, "'You Can't Always Get What You Want': Gender, Voice, and Identity in Women-Authored Comedias," in *Identity, Gender, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, ed. Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 127–41; Alexander Samson, "Distinct Drama? Female Playwrights in Golden Age Spain," in *A Companion to Spanish Women's Studies*, ed. Xon de Ros and Geraldine Hazbun (Woodbridge, England: Tamesis Books, 2011), 157–72; Teresa S. Soufas, *Dramas of Distinction: A Study of Plays by Golden Age Women* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 1–11; Lisa Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), 74–89; Amy R. Williamsen, "Re-writing in the Margins: Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer* as Challenge to Dominant Discourse," *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 44, no. 1 (1992): 21–30; and Valerie Hegstrom and Amy R. Williamsen, eds., *Engendering the Early Modern Stage: Women Playwrights in the Spanish Empire* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 1999).

2. As Samson summarizes, many women's plays highlight "female friendship, offering more nuanced explorations of women's roles, granting them agency in driving the plot rather than acting as mere vehicles for male conflict, and demonstrating a sustained interest in self-fashioning, the transformative possibilities of speech, and identity" (171).

## 2 Introduction

imperial crusade filled and refilled the state coffers, only to be spent repeatedly on efforts to maintain a grasp on far-flung peoples and nations. Wars with the Low Countries were the order of the day, as was a short-lived annexation of Portugal. All of this led to multiple bankruptcies and to a diminishing monarchy desperate to cling to a magnificent past. The age of glory put into motion by the Catholic Monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand came to an end with the death of the hapless and heirless Carlos II in 1700.

Life was perhaps not as gripped by such lofty concerns as this dramatic political setting would suggest. The relatively fast pace of social and cultural change created challenges and opportunities for the populace. By the sixteenth century, the Inquisition and the Church had a steady hand in social control; their reach extended into the private lives and choices of Spain's citizens. The Protestant and Catholic Reformations reshaped definitions of piety, loyalty, and acceptable behavior on the Iberian Peninsula. The rise of urbanization led to both an emerging merchant class and urban poverty. Simultaneously, the spoils of Iberian expansion were transported around the globe and knowledge of faraway peoples and places arrived with every ship. The movement of people, goods, and ideas characterized the era: in Iberia and throughout the empire, Spaniards had access to more information and more goods than ever before.

Enter the theater as both a site and mode of entertainment and provocation: a creative space that allowed for the ideas and changes of the day to be consumed, questioned, and displayed before large audiences. As in England, the Spanish theater became a cultural and social phenomenon late in the sixteenth century. The Spanish *corral*, the physical space of urban theater, played a role similar to that of London's Globe. Best understood as public courtyard theaters, *corrales* sprung up around the nation and provided entertainment not only for the urban elite, but for all who could afford the relatively cheap price of entry-level admission. Known as *comedias*, the plays performed in these public theaters represented a broad swath of Spanish society. They also provided an opportunity for women and men to mingle not only in the audience but also as performers, as Spain allowed women actors to work alongside their male counterparts. There was a certain price for this autonomy, as many pamphlets and treatises criticized women actors for their purportedly brazen public performances. Fundamentally, female actors engaged in economic and cultural activities that flew in the face of women's traditional roles as domesticated wives and mothers. The *comedia* did not shy away from these issues: as a genre it reflected Spanish society through diverse representations of social class, gender relations, historical moments, and power struggles. And women, as this volume attests, were often at the center of these representations—both as actors and as playwrights.

In these important ways, the Spanish theater represented a microcosm of the changes affecting women in the larger society. Urbanization had already

created more public economic roles for women than they had previously occupied in Spain's rural, agrarian society. Women were teachers, merchants, sex workers, and midwives—and they sold spells and potions aimed at inciting love, curing heartache, and ending pregnancies.<sup>3</sup> In the uppermost echelons, noblewomen influenced the monarchy and the state by arranging marriages and influencing political decisions throughout Europe and the empire.<sup>4</sup> These women also became some of Spain's great patrons, sponsoring such vastly different enterprises as the plastic arts, literature, and convent foundations.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the Counter-Reformation's prioritization of convents as a site of Catholic piety and religious expression effected a revolution that, perhaps inadvertently, provided women with new opportunities to seek positions of authority and educational pathways. The proliferation of convents in Counter-Reformation Spain increased the number of women participating in female monastic culture as nuns, and supporting that culture as laywomen.<sup>5</sup> Women of different social classes and backgrounds lived in convents:

3. Studies that engage issues related to women and work in early modern Spain include: Stephanie Fink De Backer, *Widowhood in Early Modern Spain: Protectors, Proprietors, and Patrons* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Allyson M. Poska, *Women and Authority in Early Modern Spain: The Peasants of Galicia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women*. On women and urban culture, see Nieves Romero-Díaz, *Nueva nobleza, nueva novela: Reescribiendo la cultura urbana del barroco* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2002).

4. Key scholarship on the roles and influence of Spanish noblewomen includes Consolación Baranda, ed., *María de Jesús de Ágreda: Correspondencia con Felipe IV. Religión y razón de estado* (Madrid: Castalia, 1991; rpt. 2001); Anne J. Cruz and Maria Galli Stampino, eds., *Early Modern Habsburg Women. Transnational Contexts, Cultural Contexts, Dynastic Continuities* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013); Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Suzuki, eds., *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Helen Nader, ed., *Power and Gender in Renaissance Spain: Eight Women of the Mendoza Family, 1450–1650* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); and María de Guevara, *Warnings to the Kings and Advice on Restoring Spain: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Nieves Romero-Díaz, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* 57 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

5. Important work in the area of Spanish conventual life and literature includes Electa Arenal and Georgina Sabat de Rivers, ed. and introd., *Literatura conventual femenina: Sor Marcela de San Felix, hija de Lope de Vega. Obra completa. Coloquios espirituales, loas y otros poemas* (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1988); Arenal and Stacey Schlaw, ed. and introd., *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in their Own Works*, trans. Amanda Powell, 2nd ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009); Nieves Baranda Leturio and María Carmen Marín Pina, eds., *Letras en la celda: Cultura escrita de los conventos femeninos en la España moderna* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2014); Anne J. Cruz, ed. and trans., *The Life and Writings of Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza*, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* 29 (Toronto: Iter Inc. and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014); Elizabeth Lehfeldt, *Religious Women in Early Modern Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); and Susan M. Smith and Georgina Sabat de

some non-elite women came as servants or slaves, and some were allowed to enter without a dowry.

In many cases, convent life required physical, fiscal, and spiritual maintenance of the institution. Responsibilities ranged from basic daily activities such as cleaning and cooking to managing financial operations and maintaining patron relationships. Depending on the religious order, convents varied in strictness, with some enforcing enclosure and others allowing visitors; some convents, for example, permitted women to bring servants and to see family regularly. Others, including the Discalced Carmelites founded in 1562 by Teresa de Ávila (1515–82),<sup>6</sup> promoted a meditative, interiorized relationship with God that required nuns to renounce contact with the outside world when taking vows.

Convents served as educational institutions for nuns, who often established schools for girls in the neighboring communities. Humanists such as Juan Luis Vives (1493–1540; author of *Instrucción de la mujer cristiana* [The Education of a Christian Woman], 1523) and Fray Luis de León (1527–91; author of *La perfecta casada* [The Perfect Wife], 1583) had long exhorted women to seek a strong domestic education, but had warned them against engaging too freely or deeply in science or other serious intellectual pursuits.<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, within this context of highly circumscribed support for female education, Teresa de Ávila forged a bold path that encouraged women to seek enough knowledge to be faithful and credible servants of Christ.

Indeed, Teresa de Ávila had an unprecedented influence on women's relationship to Catholicism and the written word.<sup>8</sup> A prolific and popular author whose works were read throughout Iberia and the Catholic world, she was canonized with rapidity only forty years after her death. Madre Teresa laid a multifaceted foundation for Catholic women to engage actively with their own intellectual and spiritual connections to the faith. Within convents, education was emphasized as a way for women to have access to the word of God, and, in the case of the Discalced Carmelites, to the "interior castle" she promoted. Outside the convent, Madre Teresa's works circulated widely, serving to quickly and effectively legitimize women's roles as authors and thinkers within the circumscribed realm

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Rivers, eds., *Los coloquios del Alma: Cuatro dramas alegóricos de Sor Marcela de San Félix, hija de Lope de Vega* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2006).

6. "Discalced" meaning "unshod," indicating that members of an order went about barefoot or wearing sandals—a tradition originated by Saint Francis of Assisi.

7. See, for example, Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

8. For more on Saint Teresa's cultural context and impact, see Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), and Alison Parks Weber, *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

of Catholic spirituality. It is no coincidence that many of the known Catholic convent authors would later hail from the Discalced Carmelites or similar orders, including Discalced Trinitarian Sor Marcela de San Félix (1605–87), whose work is featured in the present volume.

In combination with the proliferation of Counter-Reformation convents and the expansion of educational opportunities within convent walls, the Catholic world's enthusiastic validation of Teresa de Ávila's intellectual contributions provided a catalyst for more and more women throughout Iberia and the Americas to become writers.<sup>9</sup> While we have knowledge of some early sixteenth-century Spanish women authors, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries mark a turning point in the number of women known to have engaged with the written word.<sup>10</sup> Madre Teresa's ascension to popularity in the latter decades of the sixteenth century introduced a woman writer to a large readership and provided a legitimate model for women's engagement with the written word that would inspire countless women the world over to take up the pen.<sup>11</sup>

Within the context of the broader cultural shifts in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Spain, Madre Teresa's validation as a female intellectual leader coincided with the rise of public theater and with the intensified focus on

9. On the history of women's education and engagement with reading and writing, see Nieves Baranda Leturio, *Cortejo a lo prohibido: Lectoras y escritoras en la Edad Moderna* (Madrid: Arco Libros, 2006); Pedro Cátedra and Anastasio Rojo, *Bibliotecas y lecturas de mujeres, siglo XVI* (Salamanca: Instituto de Historia del Libro y de la Lectura, 2004); Anne J. Cruz and Rosilie Hernández, eds., *Women's Literacy in Early Modern Spain and the New World* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Howe, *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World*; and Lisa Vollendorf, *The Lives of Women*, 169–86. A superb book on Latin American nuns' writing is Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas: La escritura femenina en la espiritualidad barroca novohispana: siglos XVII y XVIII* (Puebla, México: Archivo General de la Nación / Universidad de las Américas, 2002).

10. For more on women writers and women's influence in the earlier time period, see Kirstin Downey, *Isabella: The Warrior Queen* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2014); Ronald E. Surtz, *Writing Women of Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain: The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Ávila* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Lisa Vollendorf, "Women Writers of Sixteenth-Century Spain," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Sixteenth-Century Spain*, ed. Gregory Kaplan (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2005), 335–41; and Barbara F. Weissberger, *Isabel Rules: Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

11. Scholarship that traces the transatlantic ties or connections among women in the Ibero-American Atlantic world often does so through the lens of the Catholic connections. See, for example, Arenal and Schlauf, *Untold Sisters*; Allan Greer and Jodi Bilinkoff, eds., *Colonial Saints: Discovering the Holy in the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Nora Jaffary, ed., *Gender, Race, and Religion in the Colonization of the Americas* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Daniella Kostroun and Lisa Vollendorf, eds., *Women, Religion, and the Atlantic World (1600–1800)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, in association with the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 2009); and Stephanie Merrim, *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

the degradation of the Spanish empire after the fall of the Armada in 1588. As women became actors and audience members in public theaters, they did so in a context in which women's visibility as cultural and economic actors had been on the rise. By the late sixteenth century, the social and cultural changes related to gender, authority, and religion had set the stage for educated women to enter the writing sphere in unprecedented numbers.

### *Rise of the Theater*

The women featured in the present volume figure among the growing number of known female authors in seventeenth-century Spain. While most writing by women involved letters, record-keeping, convent histories, and advice manuals, some women wrote fictional prose and plays. Among the best studied is María de Zayas y Sotomayor (b. 1590), a bestselling novella author, poet, and playwright. Yet we know of few extant plays by women, a scarcity that leaves our featured authors—Feliciana Enríquez de Guzmán (1569–ca. 1643–44), Ana Caro Mallén (1590–1650), and Sor Marcela de San Félix—in an even more rarefied position.

By writing plays, these women stepped into one of the most popular art forms of their day. They also entered into conversation with the giant of the theater, Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio (1562–1635). Often referred to as Lope, he is known outside Spain as the Spanish Shakespeare for his popularity, talent, and productivity. Lope forged a revolutionary path that led him to be called the Phoenix of Wits and a Monster of Nature. Along with Calderón de la Barca (1600–81; discussed in more detail below) and Tirso de Molina (1579–1648), he formed part of what is known as the Golden Age of Spanish theater. Yet Lope stands out for his significant contributions to both the form and role of theater in the changing society of early modern Spain. He also stands alone in his relationship to one of our featured authors, as he was Sor Marcela's father.<sup>12</sup>

Lope summarized his innovative approach to theater in a treatise written in 1609 for the Madrid *Academia*. At age forty-seven and with more than four hundred plays to his name, he published *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (The New Art of Writing *Comedias* in These Times) alongside his *Rimas Sagradas* (Sacred Poems). Lope was an audience pleaser, a writer of plays that had relevance for his time and place. *The New Art of Writing Comedias* explored this mandate. Lope was a keen observer of his surroundings and a surprisingly accurate interpreter of the public's taste, and he defended the importance of these skills in his treatise. The treatise defines what he calls a new type of theater in his time, an aesthetic that bridges classical doctrine and new ideas to reconceptualize theater for a new century. By combining comic and tragic elements in the same

12. For a general overview of the Spanish theater in this period, refer to the classical study by Ángel Valbuena Prat, *El teatro español en su Siglo de Oro* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1969).



play, allowing a mix of social classes to be represented on stage together, and fusing tragedy with comedy, he invokes the term *tragicomedia* (tragicomedy) as the ideal formula for modern plays.

*The New Art of Writing Comedias* also rejects the Aristotelian ideal of unity of action, time, and place. Instead, Lope proposes the incorporation of a line of action secondary to the main one, thereby rejecting the rule of time and place as long as the story remains credible and follows the rule of verisimilitude. His ideal play is divided into three acts (*actos* or *jornadas*), moves swiftly, surprises the audience, and leaves the denouement for the very end. Plays could also explore different themes, but he reminds his readers that the public is most interested in honor as the main theme. He underscores the importance of the comic character—the *gracioso*—as a sidekick to the main character, and emphasizes that characters should speak according to a rhythm, verse, and level appropriate to the context or to their own social standing. Lope advocates that plays follow linguistic, thematic, and poetic rules reflecting both what the public wants and what it expects from different characters.<sup>13</sup> The most important component of Lope's treatise, however, is his insistence on the audience and their preferences; in Spanish this is famously known as “el gusto del vulgo” (the commoners' taste). Lope recognized audiences as the ultimate arbiters of taste.

Who was this audience that had such a hold on the most important playwright of his day? It is impossible to speak about that audience without invoking the social changes of the era. A stronger economy fundamentally drove the growth of cities in the sixteenth century, and this, in turn, opened the possibility for the monarchy to be based in one city as opposed to traveling throughout the emerging nation-state. King Felipe II created a fixed place for his court when he moved it to Madrid in 1561. Aside from a brief moment in which Felipe III moved the court to Valladolid from 1601 to 1606, Madrid would be the courtly city from that moment forward. The rise of the urban merchant class led to greater social stratification and, for some, greater leisure time than had been possible in a wholly agrarian society. This, in turn, led to the possibility of an urban consumer culture that had previously not existed. Fixed-space public theaters—the *corrales*—eventually arose as part of the fabric of the emerging urban consumer culture.

The transition to fixed-space theaters occurred over several decades. By the second half of the sixteenth century, various European countries bore witness to a rise in playwriting and play productions. As in Italy, France, and England, Spain saw a dramatic improvement in stagecraft, with a proliferation of new techniques used to perform the plays. In a context of increased urbanization and population density, the stagecraft improvements fueled a desire to create fixed performance

13. See, for example, Juan Manuel Rozas, *Significado y doctrina del arte nuevo de Lope de Vega* (Madrid: Sociedad General Española de Librería, 1976), or more recently Enrique García Santo-Tomás's edition of Lope's *El arte nuevo de hacer comedias* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006).

spaces for urban populations. As mentioned, these courtyard theaters or *corrales de comedias* were built specifically for the purpose of providing entertainment to the masses. Social and economic conditions made these open-air theaters popular and possible, and actors and their companies benefited from having fixed sites at which to rehearse and perform. Similarly, early modern cities benefited economically from permanent theaters through levies and taxes that helped pay for hospitals and other social welfare institutions.

Between 1565 and 1635 (the year of Lope's death), the main Spanish theaters of the time were built, and two of the first—the *Corral de la Cruz*, founded in 1579, and the *Corral del Príncipe*, founded in 1582—quickly became the two most important theaters in Madrid.<sup>14</sup> The last known theater courtyard to have been built in Spain, established about 120 miles south of Madrid in Almagro in 1628, is also the only survivor of the courtyard theater era (see Figure 1). After its discovery in 1953, it was purchased by Almagro city council, which began extensive renovation work to bring it back to its original glory.

The *corral de comedias* was nothing more than a rectangular courtyard set between two houses, at one end of which was a stage, and at the other end, the entrance from the street. Members of the general public would stand on the main floor, in front of the stage, with the cheapest admission going to those in the back who became known as the rowdy groundlings (*mosqueteros*). In the adjoining building there were windows that opened from individual rooms (*apostentos*), which could be rented by members of the nobility. Normally, if the royal family attended a performance, they would occupy one of these rooms. Along the rear wall, opposite the stage, was a refreshment stand next to the entrance, while on the second floor was the *cazuela*, a dedicated box for middle-class women. Above this, there was sometimes another box, normally assigned to city councilors and other authorities. The space of the *corral*, therefore, was regulated by gender and social class. The theaters' schedules and performances also followed precise regulations set by the government to ensure order and decorum.

In spite of the regulatory nature of the space, the *corral* was nonetheless open to all regardless of rank, gender, or position in the relatively rigid social hierarchy of the day. Indeed, its mixed audience would not have been out of place in the plays of Lope, who embraced the representation of characters from different social classes, and issues affecting people throughout society, as key components of his dramaturgy. In this sense, it is impossible to separate his approach to theater from the context in which the *corrales de comedias* emerged.

14. For more on the *corral* in early modern Spanish society, see Pedro Ruiz Pérez's "El espacio de la representación: El corral, signo social," in *El espacio de la escritura: En torno a una poética del espacio del texto barroco* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), 119–55. For a general understanding of the *corral*, see Charles Davis and John Varey's *Los corrales de comedias y los hospitales de Madrid, 1574–1615: Estudio y documentos*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Tàmesis Books, 1997).

Early Modern Women. View via Publisher. Save to Library. Although scholars often depict early modern Spanish women as victims, history and fiction of the period are filled with examples of women who defended their God-given right to make their own decisions and to define their own identities. The essays in *Women Warriors in Early Modern Spain* examine many such examples, demonstrating how women battled the status quo, defended certain causes, challenged authority, and broke barriers. Such women did not necessarily engage in masculine pursuits, but often used cultural production and engaged in social subversion to exercise resistance in the home, in the street, and in the public square. This timely edition of three women playwrights of Spain's Golden Age fills a gap in the study of early modern Spanish theater. The plays have never been translated in any language and they have the potential to be taught in undergraduate and graduate courses. A biographical sketch and plot summary introduce each of the three authors, while the introduction elaborates on the varied experiences of these playwrights and their works. An overview of the different sites of theater and performance (corral, palace, and convent) effectively contextualizes the whole." -Sarah Owens, Professor