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Title page of the volume:

**Approaches to  
Teaching Early Modern  
Spanish Drama**

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Edited by

*Laura R. Bass*

and

*Margaret R. Greer*

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Rebecca Johnson and Katherine Kelly as Doña Leonor and Celia,  
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First page of the cited essay:

## Unanswering the Question: A Course on Spanish Golden Age Plays by Women

*Teresa S. Soufas*

Entering a classroom full of undergraduate and graduate students who have registered for my course Women Dramatists of the Spanish Golden Age, I look around at an academic audience of different backgrounds and levels of preparation for the undertaking we are about to tackle together. Some are there to satisfy requirements for a major or for graduation. Others have been attracted to a course about women, either because they are specializing in our women's studies program or because they have never had much exposure to women writers in courses across the disciplines. Still others are there because, unlike their classmates, they have studied the Spanish theater and want to expand their investigation to authors not read in other classes. This mixture is the perfect grounding for sharing information about the five women dramatists who have been the focus of my research (Soufas, *Dramas*) and who continue to be the basis for this course: Ángela Azevedo, Ana Caro Mallén de Soto, Leonor de la Cueva y Silva, Feliciano Enríquez de Guzmán, and María de Zayas y Sotomayor.

During the first two meetings of the seminar, I present the questions that will inform our discussions throughout the semester. As I explain, women dramatists of the Golden Age, writing from an intersection of proto-essentialist and proto-constructionist perspectives, depict what various scholars (e.g., Constance Jordan and Karen Offen) have demonstrated as two models in early modern epistemology for describing and accounting for human behavior with regard to the sexes. The relational model focuses on the differences in experiences of men and women and ponders the essential, or natural, definition of women vis-à-vis that of men; in other words, it is interested in what women are and do in contrast to what men are and do. The individualist model, by contrast, understands men and women as autonomous in relation to politics and law; refusing to take essence as the basis for women's (or men's) behavior, it is akin to current constructionist views of gender and counters what essentialists consider self-evident categories rather than multifaceted discursive practices. Constance Jordan's cogent examination of the way Renaissance feminism embraces both the individualist and the relational models is an important point for students to recognize as we take up the dramatic pieces produced during the early modern period in Spain.

My class is not, therefore, one in which we will find a fixed way to read all the plays. That is, the writers are woman centered insofar as their dramas evince an appreciation of the social, political, and cultural conventions that assign activities and opportunities to men and women differently. Their positions as women authors are frequently raised in their works. Likewise, through their struggles to right wrongs or meet goals, their female characters often engage in activities



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conventionally associated with men. Yet at the same time, the playwrights' questioning of the individualist stance endures as long as an episode of depicted social mayhem lasts, whereupon the dramatized world resolves itself into one in which women move closer to the relational model and resume behaviors usually attributed to the "perfecta casada" ("perfect wife"; see Dopico Black) and the men continue their public roles and hegemony over decision making. As a result, students who want to experience the literature of a subset of authors who differ from the canonical male writers will not be entirely satisfied. No revolutionary overthrow of the cultural norms is depicted in any of these plays. Nor will there be satisfaction for students who are certain that female-authored plays are indistinguishable from the male-authored counterparts they are familiar with. Taking cues from Diana Fuss, we evaluate the works throughout the semester by questioning the fixity of the essentialist versus the constructionist divide, recognizing that one stance is often embedded in the other.

Where to begin the formal study of the primary texts? The start for me is to make certain that the students understand the theater in Spain's sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Margaret Wilson's *Spanish Drama of the Golden Age* is a helpful literary-historical resource. Other works I reserve in the library for consultation include Melveena McKendrick's *Theatre in Spain*, J. H. Elliott's *Spain and Its World*, Henry Kamen's *Spain, 1469–1714*, John Lynch's *Hispanic World and his Spain, 1516–1598*; I assign chapters or sections from these writers to the class or to individuals, according to students' background knowledge and preparation.

Having digested the preliminary readings and discussions, the students and I are ready to investigate the woman-authored plays. What I offer is a context for considering each play; in addition, I encourage students to ask questions that they can ponder with me, and I remind the class that I am not looking for any single right answers. I invite them to recognize the early modern double focus that, on the one hand, accepted the relational, essentializing models of the humanistic discourse, which insisted on the natural place for women in society and, on the other, acknowledged the individualist paradigm, which recognized the construction of social and cultural identity and admitted more fluidity to role assumption (Soufas, *Dramas* 20). Within this double perspective we find an identifiable thread in the woman-authored plays: the male characters fail to fulfill their socially assigned role; they leave it to the women to behave in ways that the men around them can emulate. In some of the plays, the authors portray cross-dressed characters or cross-gendered roles or affects, while others depict women refusing to accept the limitations imposed on them by normative traditions. Yet in neither case do the characters and situations suggest that it is appropriate to end the represented social structure. The traditional social roles are resumed at the end of each play. Nevertheless, the idea of a counterdiscourse has been raised, with its implications for permeable boundaries of roles and identities.

The playwrights we explore are no longer authors to be discovered. There are



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Last page of the cited essay:

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artistic, and cultural complexity embedded in each text and in the context of its composition. I want students to be able to transpose some of the notions of gender construction and gender norms to other topics and readings in the future, just as I want to give them the experience of learning about Spanish Golden Age theater through authors and works on our reading list. And every student should be able to tell me why he or she thinks that such a reading list should or should not be gender-specific.