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Review: Vidler, Laura L. Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama: Reviving and Revising the Comedia

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Performance Reconstruction and Spanish Golden Age Drama: Reviving and Revising the Comedia. Laura L. Vidler.

Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xvi + 188 pp. \$90.

This new monograph is a valuable contribution to the study of the staging practices of Spanish Golden Age theater. According to Vidler, scholars have not paid enough attention to these praxes. Since the late 1950s, only a few academics — such as Varey, Shergold, Allen, and Ruano de la Haza — have illustrated and imagined the modus operandi of authors and theatrical companies in early modern Spain. Even on these occasions, their work has been limited to the gathering and recollection of historical documents — such as contracts and lease agreements — that provide evidence of the architecture of the *corrales*, the division of space on the stage, and so forth. Indeed, little

has been done to try to reconstruct the original performance of a play. Vidler explains the complexity of the re-creation of the *mise-en-scène* by underscoring the ephemeral existence of a live representation. In spite of all of this, she pursues her goal of reviving the spirit of a spectacle by examining the process in which the show is produced together with the traces left behind by the protagonists in written testimonies.

The book is divided into seven chapters. After a brief survey of the obstacles, such as speculation and flawed translation, to actualize the ethereal world of theater (later expanded in chapters 6 and 7), chapter 2 is dedicated to different notions of space and their manifestations in the scenery. Using Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina* as a starting point, Vidler highlights the influence of the misogynistic description of his female characters, both in the literary text and a series of woodcuts, in the construction of the acting habitus for a series of plays that continued the tradition of this popular comedy. In Lope de Vega's *El caballero de Olmedo*, the archetype of the Celestinesque witch had an enormous cultural impact in the depiction of the go-between Fabia through her clothes and freedom of movement. Indeed, her independence and bravery in transcending the negative and restrictive aspects of her gender in the period are contrasted with the limitation of action imposed on the honorable women who had to remain safe at home behind bars to protect their honor. In chapter 3, Vidler looks at another important structuring element of a show, namely gestures and bodily movement. Semiotics may be useful to reproduce the facial and corporal motion of the actors on stage. In fact, thanks to the discovery of Renaissance treatises on the art of dancing and fencing — such as those by Juan de Esquivel Navarro and Luis Pacheco de Narváez — a director could teach his cast about the correct position of their feet and limbs in a group dance or a fight with swords. This reproduction is not, however, completely identical. The use of video recording and labanotation, “a standardized system for recording human motion developed in 1928” (59), has not allowed us to capture every move, either. Chapter 4 complicates this inability to achieve perfection by exploring the inversion and dislocation of commonly used props and artifacts — such as ribbons, love letters, capes, and swords — again in Lope's *El caballero de Olmedo*. The author demonstrates that objects could also be manipulated to maintain a false appearance in the eyes of the beholder. The analysis of theatrical manipulation in the hands of women is revisited in chapter 5. Vidler outlines the destabilizing consequences of material and spatial appropriation when two female characters, Solmira and Antona, in Lope de Vega's *El último godo* and Tirso de Molina's *Antona García*, usurp the use of weaponry and take their place in a military society reserved for men while still wearing women's clothing and without hiding their identity.

All in all, Vidler's monograph is informative, innovative, and entertaining. Nevertheless, she tends to move away from the discussion of her thesis to constantly digress into unnecessarily long comparisons of the reconstruction of a theatrical performance with the re-creation of wildlife in a zoo, a historical battle in the US, a dish cooked by a relative (with the recipe included in an appendix), and many other topics.

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