

Review of Persephone's Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature

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Abstract:

This article is a review of *Persephone's Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature* by Marcia L. Welles

Keywords: Book review | Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature | Literary analysis | Violence against women | Rape

Article:

Persephone's Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature. By Marcia L. Welles. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2000. 257 pages.

Impressive both in scope and in critical sophistication, *Persephone's Girdle* is a provocative work that forces readers to confront the violence that all too often remains hidden in literary texts. In the introduction, Marcia Welles recounts an anecdote regarding an anonymous friend's reaction to her explanation of the genesis of the study. When she credits a re-reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for her interest in the topic of rape in literature, he reacts with astonishment. Just as she leads this reluctant friend to recognize the violence inherent in Ovid, she skillfully engages readers in her efforts to trace the signs of violence that mark seventeenth-century Spanish literary tradition.

The introduction sketches the evolution of the presentation of rape in literature, evoking sources ranging from Ovid to Lorca. She clearly details how women's bodies serve as sites of social and

political exchange in mythological, historical, and literary narratives. Chapter i, "Rape and the Resolution of Class Conflict" offers a re-reading of Cervantes's *La fuerza de la sangre* that unveils the violence masked by traditional critical approaches highlighting the "metaphorical" or "allegorical" nature of this problematic novella.. Chapter ii focuses on "Rape and Revolution" as dramatized by Rojas Zorilla's *Lucrecia y Tarquino* and Lope's *El principe desesperado*. The incorporation of theoretical insights from Mieke Bal's *Reading Rembrandt* enriches the analysis of how metaphorical displacement functions.

In Chapter iii, "The Gendering of Violence," Welles highlights how, although the women in the peasant honor plays are clearly presented as objects rather than subjects, their "violations" are the catalysts for the main action. Her commentaries on Peribanez, *El mejor alcalde, el Rey* and *El alcalde de Zalamea* all prove insightful and intriguing as she examines how the female body operates as site of symbolic exchange. Nonetheless, given the emphasis throughout Welles's work on exposing violence and the mechanisms that serve to mask it, one may be disappointed in the reading of *Laurencia in Fuenteovejuna* which accepts at face value Frondoso's statement to the King that his love staved off all attempts the Comendador waged against her virtue. The author relegates any consideration of alternate possibilities to a limited end note, asserting in the text that *Laurencia's* virginity remains "intact" despite compelling textual evidence to the contrary. *Laurencia's* disheveled appearance as detailed in her own words at the beginning of Act iii is a sign that bespeaks of violence (and a sign that Welles herself reads effectively in other texts). Rather than giving voice to the violence of rape, here Welles seems to perpetuate its silencing. That Frondoso, appearing before the King in a public forum, might employ words to assert his wife's chastity and thereby his own honor does not mean that she was not victim of a violent assault; rather, it demonstrates that—as Welles powerfully illustrates throughout her study—"language... with its brilliant strategies of circumlocution, so often seeks to disguise, rather than to express, pain" (38).

Chapter iv, "Text and Transformation: Mythology and Bible as Source" is perhaps the richest of the entire work. Welles's command of the source texts and their transformations is admirable; her analysis is illuminating. Though much of the material is necessarily grim, her style is engaging and lively. In her discussion of the concept of ("postcoital") woman's tongue as her weapon, she even incorporates a headline from a tabloid ("*Fed-Up Husband Rips Tongue Out of Nagging Wife's Mouth!!*"). Of particular interest is the reading of *Tamar* in both Tirso and Calderon which leads Welles to conclude "As phallic female, *Tamar* is a reminder to the reader and the viewer of the violence inherent in the construction of femininity as mutilation, as lack" (175).

The work closes with a brief examination of a contemporary rape narrative, *Ana Maria Moix's Julia*. Even in this work, where psychological trauma is foregrounded, the violation remains unspoken and untold. Yet, as Welles points out, "novels such as *Moix's*, by memorializing the event, critique rape as a social practice and expose the ideological underpinnings that permit, and thus perpetuate, this violence done unto another" (185). The epilogue continues in this vein, imploring readers to read the violence back into texts that attempt to erase it so that it becomes

de-naturalized and therefore visible, so that we may break this centuries-long silence that perpetuates the commodification of women.

Yet a significant silence mars this impressive volume. The author clarifies that it was an editorial decision to offer all quotations from the original Spanish, French, and Italian sources that grace the pages only in English translation. This policy means that there is no direct access to the original wording (either in the body of the text or even in end notes)-the texts themselves have been silenced. Their excision represents an act of linguistic violence that inhibits academic inquiry. As literary critics, we should have respect for other's words and other languages; we should recognize that any translation no matter how precise represents an interpretation. Given our country's political climate, this editorial decision is a potentially insidious manifestation of the cultural and linguistic myopia behind all "English-only" movements. Nonetheless, Welles's erudition shines throughout the work.

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