

**Unveiling Women's Perspectives:
"Dangerous Women" from Early Modern Spain and Colonial México
Uriel Lopez-Serrano Class of 2020**

This summer I studied 15th-17th century Spanish female playwrights, focusing on the social histories of Spain and Mexico (New Spain)¹. My goal was to understand how society changed during the expansion of the Spanish empire, attending in particular to the roles of women and their place in social hierarchies. Despite the prevailing patriarchy, the role of women² was fluid and their agency could be impacted by several factors, including new racial categories that came into existence in the Americas (Cowans 41).

As my project shifted to the theater history research, I focused on playwrights who followed the formulaic *comedia* structure developed by renowned playwright Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio (1562-1635) and on the *corrales*³ in which these *comedias* were performed (McKendrick 72 and 178). Each *comedia* has three-acts (*jornadas*), about 3,000 polymetric lines written in stanzas, and a gracioso (buffoon) (McKendrick 73). Although playwriting was a field dominated by men, a handful of talented and educated women were able to stand out among their male peers and showcase their work. I chose to study the lives and *comedias* of two of these writers: Ana Caro Mallén de Soto (~1600-50's, Spain) focusing on her plays *Valor, agravio y mujer* (Valor, outrage and woman) and *El conde Partinuplés* (Count Partinuplés); and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (~1648-95, México) focusing on *Amor es más laberinto* (Love is a greater labyrinth) and *Los empeños de una casa* (House of Trials). Ana Caro was the first woman in Spain to be paid for her writing and Sor Juana's multiple talents granted her the title "La Decima Musa de México" (México's tenth Muse) and she also lived to witness the publication of her works, an experience unheard of for other women playwrights (Soufas 134 and More xi).

As part of my project, I visited the LILLAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections to consult the Dorothy Schons Papers, an archival collection that was put together to showcase work of Dorothy Schons, an Associate Professor of Roman Languages at University of Texas Austin who is known as the first *Sor Juanista*: Sor Juana enthusiast and scholar. Through the collection, I found primary documents about Sor Juana's birth place, San Miguel, Nepantla, México as well as photographs, manuscripts, and notebooks containing further details about her life. This trip allowed me to familiarize myself with the archival research process and collection of data, and I plan to use these materials in an independent study about Sor Juana in spring 2019. I have recorded my research process on a Bowdoin website powered by WordPress. I will revisit this site in the future to add and update information regarding my project.

This preliminary research leads me to conclude that both Ana Caro and Sor Juana had to be subtle when writing about the contemporary social barriers for those low in the social hierarchy. Although they both wrote in the *comedia* genre, each writer developed a distinct voice to articulate her perspective. Ana Caro's *comedia* looks into the struggles of women, particularly those belonging to the nobility, and rarely attempts to represent other positions. In contrast, Sor Juana's *comedia* reflects the struggles of the lower classes. It is my thesis that their different backgrounds impacted how they portrayed their characters. Future research will consider other works by Sor Juana, like her poetry, to see if there is consistency in her views regarding the lower classes. I will also assess how faithful Sor Juana is to the actual historical representation of people and to what extent she is aware of intersectionality.

¹ See the "Introduction[s]" of Jon Cowans's *Early Modern Spain: A Documentary* and Henry Kamen's *Golden Age Spain* for more on term usage. Early Modern Period is a better term for describing the history of Spain and Latin America because it is not limited. The history of theater in Spain may also be referred to as the *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Age), but this term does not encompass the scope of the Early Modern Period.

² See Susan Midgen Socolow's "Conquest and Colonization" in *The Women of Colonial Latin America* and Lisa Vollendorf's *The Lives of Women: A New History of Inquisitional Spain*.

³ See "The *comedia*: some definitions and problems" and "The *corrales* and their audiences" in Melveena McKendrick's *Theatre in Spain, 1490-1700* for a thorough explanation about the *comedia* and *corrales*. According to McKendrick, the *corral* was, in many ways, a playhouse similar to the London Globe.

Visuals: Courtesy of LILLAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections



Cabrera, Miguel. Photostat of The Tenth Muse. Dorothy Schons Papers, 1586-1955. LILLAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, University of Texas Austin Libraries.



Cáceres Novelo, Manuel. Drawing of Sor Juana. Dorothy Schons Papers, 1586-1955. LILLAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, University of Texas Austin Libraries.

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Works Cited

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Soufas, Teresa Scott. "Ana Caro Mallén de Soto." In *Women's Acts: Plays by Women Dramatists of Spain's Golden Age*, edited by Teresa Scott Soufas, 133–36. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.