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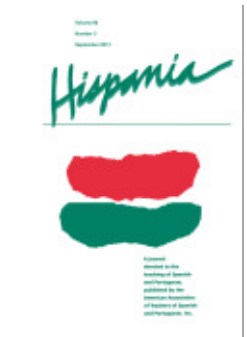
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## The Novels of Carmen Conde: Toward an Expression of Feminine Subjectivity by Lisa Nalbone (review)

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Hispania, Volume 96, Number 3, September 2013, pp. 584-585 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/hpn.2013.0075



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read, the book is structured in such a way that the interested scholar could easily read one discreet section as if it were a self-contained article and garner much knowledge and insight.

In his introductory chapter, Merino formulates several assertions to which he returns throughout his text. One of the most essential is that without a firm grasp of Cela's civic, social, and ideological commitment during his youth, we cannot understand the more widely known work of his later period. Merino also points out that we do not usually value the literature of regimes that we find reprehensible and that we do not often speak of the concept of the "ideal citizen" in non-democratic societies. As a result of these preconceived notions about the worth of the literature produced under repressive regimes, some critics have provided a superficial reading of Cela's work, and many have assumed that Cela feigned commitment to Falangist ideals was a way to get ahead or simply survive. Merino, however, confidently addresses this assertion when he states that Cela was a firm believer in the ideology of New Spain and the intellectual's corresponding responsibility to be a man of both "armas y letras." Through his incorporation of respected criticism from Spain and other countries, Merino presents a thorough analysis of the concept of author and makes a clear distinction between the writer as a citizen who writes and the author as a textual construction. In other words, the writer already exists as an individual while the author, who is created by his readers consciously or unconsciously, cannot appear independent of his texts and is owned by his texts rather than is the producer of them. With the theories of critics such as John Rodden as a springboard, Merino presents a fascinating meditation on fame, prestige, and reputation in the literary world. Cela is seen as a "true believer" but also as one who was able to exploit the prevailing political discourse for the fulfillment of his personal ambitions.

Merino's study fills yet another key critical gap by focusing not just on the frequently studied novel *La familia de Pascual Duarte* but also on all the genres to which Cela contributed: novel, poetry, prose, and journalism. He dedicates a chapter to each and explores how these literary avenues ensured Cela's place in the cultural canon of Francoist ideology. As Merino explains, Cela himself is quoted when possible to avoid any miscommunication that can arise from intermediacy. All of Merino's quotes are relevant and interesting, and both the index and bibliography are thorough and helpful.

*Con la pluma caliente* is a necessary source for anyone who endeavors to truly appreciate Cela's importance to the world of Spanish letters. Given the in-depth analysis of many theoretical issues, readers interested in the construction of a literary reputation, the concept of authorship, or the fabrication of a political identity in its historical context could learn much from this book and aptly apply it to writers from many cultures and circumstances. Merino elucidates Cela's less studied works and explores the relationship between literature and patriotism; his book is of interest to students and scholars from varied disciplines that all have something to gain from learning how this talented writer flourished within a repressive regime.

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**Nalbone, Lisa.** *The Novels of Carmen Conde: Toward an Expression of Feminine Subjectivity.* Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2012. Pp. 161. ISBN 978-1-58871-212-7.

Carmen Conde is known primarily as a poet and as the first woman elected to the Spanish Royal Academy. However, she also wrote novels, short stories, children's literature, theater, and literary criticism. While her poetry has received critical attention, her novels have gone virtually unnoticed. Lisa Nalbone begins to correct this neglect with her comprehensive study of the eight novels Conde published between 1945 and 2002, but wrote earlier between the last years of the reign of Alfonso XIII and Spain's transition to democracy. Looking at these novels from a feminist perspective, Nalbone examines how Conde portrays the female protagonists

and their inner struggle for independence, inner peace, and self-realization. She stresses the extent to which these characters challenge existing patriarchal models of women's roles and behavior, specifically as they relate to domesticity, motherhood, sexual desire, and existential autonomy. While noting the sociopolitical context in which the characters try to navigate the restrictions placed on them, Nalbone calls attention to shifts in the novelist's viewpoint over the years. Although the book focuses on the characterization of the main character of each of Conde's novels, in doing so, Nalbone also uncovers Conde's treatment of a number of other themes, such as absence, interpersonal relations, coming of age, and death.

*The Novels of Carmen Conde: Toward an Expression of Feminine Subjectivity* is divided into three parts in which each novel is studied in chronological order. The first part, called "The Lyric Subject," analyzes *Vidas contra su espejo*, *En manos del silencio*, and *Las oscuras raíces*, novels that revolve around inner turmoil, family conflicts, and violent deaths. The second part, called "The Subject Transformed," studies *Cobre* with its gender shifting, *La Rambla*, a frame tale of four separate narrations, and *Creció espesa la yerba*, a novel in which a middle-aged woman recovers her past through memory. The third part, "The Self-Manumitted Subject," comprises studies of *Soy la madre*, a novel about the commitment to motherhood followed by the liberation from the image of the mother, and *Virginia o la calle de los balcones*, a work published posthumously that deals with a middle-aged woman's doubts concerning her relationship with a much younger man.

The discussion of each novel begins with comments on the book's composition and a succinct review of the critical responses to its published version. The bulk of each chapter is devoted to a description and explication of the protagonist's development. In all the novels, Nalbone finds evidence of a wish on the part of the protagonist to break free of gender bias and normative conduct as well as varying reactions to the idea of the new, modern woman that emerged as Spain evolved from dictatorship to democracy. The book ends with an appendix of brief plot summaries of the eight novels, a list of works cited, and an index of proper names. It would have been helpful to readers to have had subjects incorporated into the index, given the variety of motifs as different as abortion and the gaze and images including the mirror and the tomb mentioned in connection with the feminist implications of the works. Minor errors and one glaring grammatical mistake ("His break with María allows both she [sic] and Laura. . .") can be overlooked thanks to the book's otherwise polished prose and, above all, to its scholarly underpinnings.

Lisa Nalbone has assimilated an impressive range of studies in feminism and of general literary criticism written by American, British, Spanish, and French scholars and theoreticians. She does not merely catalogue her readings in an introduction, nor does she quote from the works of others for the sake of erudite flourish, but rather, she integrates them seamlessly throughout her analyses whenever appropriate to lend credence to her arguments. These references give variety as well as depth to discussions that might otherwise seem repetitive. The book also reflects Nalbone's consultation of some of the thousands of items housed in the Carmen Conde Foundation in Cartagena. Thorough almost to a fault, Nalbone finds meaning in the smallest or seemingly trivial detail. Her interpretations of a character's action or of an aspect of a plot may seem strained at times, but the support of feminist theory and authoritative critical voices makes her readings on the whole convincing. Conde's novels in her lifetime appealed more to the general reading public than to the critical or highly cultured reader, and some could be considered potboilers, but Nalbone treats them seriously as examples of works replete with telling information on women's struggle for freedom and on Conde's strength as a writer. A solidly researched book, *The Novels of Carmen Conde* may very well, as its author hopes, initiate further exploration of Conde's narrative from any number of possible angles.

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