



Subtle Subversions: Reading Golden Age Sonnets by Iberian Women

Fox G

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Women across early modern Europe suffered repressive and restrictive patriarchal measures that denied them education and a voice. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Counter-Reformation Iberia. Yet there is increasing awareness of a wealth of cultural activity by women, produced in spite of long-cherished masculine notions of biological determinism, masculine control, and feminine shame. Women proved that given the opportunity and the education they were equal in reason and intelligence to their male counterparts.

Subtle Subversions is the first full-length, contextual, and analytical study of the sonnets of five seventeenth-century women in Spain and Portugal: Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza, Catalina Clara Ramírez de Guzmán, Sor María de Santa Isabel, Leonor de la Cueva y Silva, and Sor Violante del Cielo. Using the sonnets as a basis for inquiry, Gwyn Fox adds significantly to scholarship on women's interpersonal relationships through nuanced and revealing analyses of family and friendship as seen through the sonnets. She deciphers issues of subjectivity, interpersonal relationships, and power structures and engages with patronage as a major issue in women's writing.

As a difficult form of poetry requiring wit, artistry and education, sonnets provided the ideal framework to display intellectual skills and education, but they also allowed the women to create a subtext of criticism of contemporary systems of control. Although their criticisms had to be subtle, since these systems still offered them much in terms of social advancement and privilege, these women and their works revise our understanding of women's lives in Baroque Spain and Portugal.

English translations accompany the Spanish quotations throughout the book.

Gwyn Fox is honorary research fellow at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where she teaches Spanish language and literature. Fox is currently translating *Los baños de Argel*, a previously untranslated play by Miguel de Cervantes.

"Fox demonstrates that the fixed form of the sonnet simultaneously allowed women to showcase their intellectual talents and critique predominant masculine norms in an understated fashion. . . . Recommended."
? P.W. Manning, *Choice*

"In this beautifully written study of five early modern Iberian poets, Gwyn Fox offers a revisionary history of women's poetics as well as a challenge to conventional Renaissance hermeneutics. . . . Fox delves deeply into each theme, not only contextualizing, but also historicizing her analysis by comparing these women's writings with a broad range of examples. Indeed a bonus of this book is that it does not limit itself to the five women specified above or solely to their sonnets. Fox speaks knowledgeably about other women writers, such as Maria de Zayas and Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, to name the most well known, and mentions lesser-known figures such as Inarda de Arteaga. . . . [Fox's] close readings of individual poems are themselves subtle and nuanced. . . . She offers original insights into the poems' social purpose. . . . It is a welcome and

much-needed addition to early modern Spanish scholarship." ? Anne J. Cruz, *Renaissance Quarterly*

"Fox's contribution adds to prior rediscoveries and assessments of the poetry of five Iberian women of the Baroque about whose lives, in some cases, very little is known. . . . The critical analysis offered in *Subtle Subversions* present new insights into the interpersonal relationships of women as well as their engagement with structures of social power, affirming that their sonnets were meant to display these authors' intellect, wit, and education. . . . With her skillful readings of their sonnets, Fox offers a fuller picture of these women's poetic production and contributes to an overall understanding of upperclass women's lives in Spain and Portugal." ? Dana Bultman, *Caliope*

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