ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature
Janet Prez, editor
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Scholars and casual investigators will find themselves delightfully engaged with the lively prose of this specialized two-volume encyclopedia, which, in spite of classically academic source research, reads like a series of popular essays. Contributors for the hundreds of entries have been selected by the editors from an international range of experts on the topics treated. Perez is Associate Dean of the Graduate School of Spanish at Texas Tech University and Ihrie is Professor of Spanish at Elon College.

In a section titled "Autobiographical Self-Representation of Women in the Early Modern Period," which begins with an account of the writings of St. Teresa of Avila, the author advises: "The Catholic response to Protestantism … made confessors both wary and aware of the potential latent in exuberantly pious souls. At the same time the Church during this period was sensitive to the benefits to be accrued from evidence that God was alive and well in practicing Catholics and could be directly experienced through the hierarchy of the Church."

The cross-referencing device of using certain words as signals for accessing relative and expanding information on a topic keeps the reader leafing back and forth through subjects that would otherwise rarely have seemed relevant. This virtual treasure hunt opens the work as a whole to a carefully coordinated and richly textured opportunity for learning more than an original question might have anticipated. Addenda organize both issues and personalities by century, by topic, and by biographical dates. Each section is followed by references both to works by treated individuals and works about them, a method that serves serious investigators significantly more clearly than even the most annotated bibliography.

Opening any page of either of these volumes almost at random, one is presented with a fascinating variety of unexpected and generally unrecorded snippets of information, demonstrating the degree and extent to which poetry, drama, romances, and spiritual essays by women have existed down through the centuries apart from the official literary tradition. Readers will learn about the political activism of Victoria Kent Siano, Spain's first woman

lawyer who, in 1931, opposed women's suffrage, proposing the necessity for a preceding sweeping improvement in education. Her motive: the knowledge that the vast majority of women in Spain were so under the persuasive control of the clergy, and other right-wing political forces, that they were sure to vote for the conservative programs which would keep them in bondage to a patriarchal system even longer and more thoroughly than they already were.

Of particular interest is a section on the status of women in post-Franco Spain. In spite of a continued popular assumption of male supremacy and the persistence of an overall patriarchality, it appears that important inroads are developing concerning the dual problem of spousal and child abuse. However, career opportunities for women are still notably more open in academic than in literary and other cultural pursuits.

At a price that most serious scholars or collectors should be able to afford, this handsome two-volume set (including an introduction, addenda, and index) will be a central gem in any private library. Any college or university with programs in either women's studies or Spanish language, literature, and culture will find it indispensable.

Sandy McKinney