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TITLE: *Exploring Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in Four Spanish Plays: A Crisis of Identity*

AUTHOR: Beth Ann Bernstein

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AUTHOR OF THE REVIEW: Jessica Rodrigues Poletti, University of California, Davis

In *Exploring Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in Four Spanish Plays: a Crisis of Identity*, Beth Bernstein thoroughly examines four plays that are linked in that each of the main characters battle with a different issue of identity and self-definition. In the first two chapters, the author explores two Spanish plays from the seventeenth century that deal with questions of race and ethnicity; in chapter three and four, the focus switches to two plays from the twentieth century that deal with gender and sexuality - or the rebellion against heteronormativity. The plays are similar in the way the protagonists struggle with shifting identities and must decide whether to conform to social precepts in terms of disguising or rejecting their differences. The construction of identity and struggle of the characters often leads to the necessity to wear a mask in order to perform in society, and this causes the characters much psychological pain.

The book is divided into four chapters, each analyzing a single play. In chapter one, Bernstein explores issues of ethnic identity, "purity of blood," or *pureza de sangre*, and oppression towards New Christians, or *conversos*, in Miguel de Cervantes' play *El retablo de las maravillas*. According to Bernstein, Cervantes, who is believed to be of Jewish heritage himself, uses his short play to criticize seventeenth century obsession with blood purity and lineage.

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Chapter two analyzes Vélez de Guevara's seventeenth century play *Virtudes vencen señales*. Guevara was, indeed, of *converso* origin, and eventually in his life picked a last name that would mask his real lineage and reflect an imagined noble heritage. Unlike Cervantes, Vélez de Guevara is determined to be accepted by Spanish society, and this reflects in his play, where the protagonist Filipo, a Black Prince born from white parents, is fully integrated in society after proving he has a "white," noble soul.

In chapter three, Federico García Lorca's posthumous play *El público* is seen to portray several characters who are struggling to form an identity, in a constant battle to define their sexuality to others and to themselves. The main dilemma is whether or not the main character, the director, should show his queerness and be condemned by an intolerant society, or should he disguise his real identity and be consumed by the desires of a forbidden love. According to Bernstein, Federico García Lorca, who struggled with his own identity issues during his life, displays his tormented soul and his need to deal with his alternative sexuality in this play.

The final chapter studies a more contemporary play by Paloma Pedrero, *La llamada de Lauren*, which also deals with the taboo subject of sexuality and gender identity, expressing the desire of its protagonist

for acceptance of his sexual difference. Like in Vélez's play, we follow the psychological journey of the protagonist who, until now, has repressed his non-heteronormative desire to dress like a woman and show the feminine side of his identity.

Throughout the volume, we see continuity in the way these characters with alternative, dissident identities are treated by society. Bernstein stresses the importance of the historical context to understand character development and plot themes. For example, in the plays written by Cervantes and Guevara we can observe that obsession with blood purity and anti-Semitism during the sixteen and seventeen centuries was quite common. Bernstein explains that political decline and poverty only hardened Spanish hatred towards Jews and other marginalized groups, who were used as scapegoats for the problems in society. In Lorca's play, written at the beginning of the twentieth century under the government of Primo de Rivera, the attitude towards marginalized members of society, such as homosexuals or gender transgressors, does not seem to have improved, and the difficulty of accepting one's own sexuality in this oppressive environment continues. Finally, after the bloody Civil War (1936-1939) followed by the almost forty years of Franco's

dictatorship (1939-1975), which had a profound impact on society, Pedrero's play is the first insight into a much-neglected topic such as male cross-dressing.

No matter what marginalized identity, the progression of the analysis in this book shows that it is still a struggle to gain societal acceptance of these differences in a mostly white, heterosexual paradigm. Beth Bernstein observes that the themes analyzed in her study are still quite present in today's globalized society, and this is where her book is a relevant tool to put issues such as racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, in a historical context. By drawing connections with contemporary figures, such as Sacha Baron Cohen, the author demonstrates how some attitudes towards Jewish people have not changed that much: Bernstein observes that the comedian uses satiric elements similar to Cervantes—such as making fun of his ignorant, easily persuaded audience—to talk about prejudices towards Jews and indifference to anti-Semitism.

Exploring Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in Four Spanish Plays is an essential reading for Spanish theater scholars and for those interested in furthering their knowledge of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in society. Overall, Bernstein's book is a great addition to the field of Peninsular Spanish studies and drama.