REVIEWS

Shifra Armon. ***Picking Wedlock: Women and the Courtship Novel in Spain***. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 231p.

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Shifra Armon's *Picking Wedlock*, comprised of an introduction, five tightly-wrought chapters, a brief afterword, and useful appendix, skillfully examines the common themes and motivations of a combined 21 plots written by three female novelists of the 17th century. At the heart of Armon's critical study is the question of why these three writers chose to write courtship novels, a genre, she explains, that was already "receding into extinction" from Spanish literature. Equally important to Armon is the fact that this genre and by association these three writers remain "commonly dismissed as inferior" and often ignored completely by contemporary literary scholars and historians. Armon answers her own question by arguing that this particular genre was most likely appealing to women writers and readers because it allowed for a multi-dimensional subjectivity far from the female stereotypes we might expect in a novel centered on courtship and marriage. Female characters in courtship novels are not, according to Armon, limited to the "paradigm of the *perfecta casada*, or obedient wife." She also proves, through her cohesive and in-depth analysis, that considering these female-authored courtship plots is indeed a worthwhile endeavor.

Before we follow the writer through close readings and analysis of the novels at hand, we are first asked, in Chapter 1, to replace the standard term "courtly novel" ("novela cortesana") with the author's term "novella de cortejo," or "courtship novel" in order to divest the genre of sexist connotations associated with the gendered word "cortesana." This shift would also reflect that the female characters in these novels, like their authors, are more active than passive, agents in their own fates rather than victims to men's plots. While some critics may wonder if this linguistic shift is necessary, or whether a change in terminology has the potential to revive and revise an entire genre, I would argue that Armon's proposal is a crucial key to "picking wedlock." By reclaiming the courtship novel through the very language that places it within a literary and historical category, Armon succeeds in opening up a genre that is dominated and defined by women writers, herself included.

Whether readers accept this shift in terminology or not, Armon does make an indisputable case for (re)considering the works by Maria de Zayas, Leonor de

Meneses, and Mariana de Carvajal in one critical volume devoted to the courtship novel in Spain, *Picking Wedlock* being the only volume of its kind to date. By the time we reach the author's afterword, modern readers are convinced that courtship novels (and their authors) are worthy of close inspection from a historical and literary perspective and are not merely trifling tales about securing a husband. Along the way, the rug is often pulled out from under the feet of readers who expect a cast of victimized damsels and overbearing suitors. Instead, maidens embarking upon courtship or wedlock are sometimes aided by other female characters, family members, the intervention of cultural institutions, or supernatural forces, and they often use their own innate attributes and learned skills to gain the advantage over unsuspecting men. Courtship novels quickly dispel the myths that women in early modern Spain and Spanish literature passively entered into courtship only to emerge isolated, without resources, and confined to life sentences as oppressed "wives."

Sometimes plots do not end in matrimonial bliss; they are sometimes even bloody, violently claiming both male and female victims. It is in these instances where we can best see that the goal of the courtship novel, unlike conduct manuals that were popular at the time, was not to reinforce the dominant ideology of wedlock and women's narrowly-defined role within it. While both conduct manuals and courtship novels were instructional, Armon argues that only courtship novels are characterized by a "commitment to representing women's experiences" and therefore are able to "identify aspects of female subjectivity that the dominant discourse neglected or suppressed." Courtship novels reflect a range of female experiences rather than prescribing one set of rules for maidens to follow; they are subversive while at the same time cleverly normative because of the subject matter. Even the three authors' dedications to their respective patrons, as we learn in Chapter 5, subvert political views on courtly marriages. Zayas, Meneses, and Carvajal, like many of the female characters they created, are hardly passive players in a male-dominated game.

To ensure that this genre, newly christened "courtship novels," does not continue to be ignored, Armon includes a detailed appendix that encourages scholars to read and analyze the primary sources for ourselves. Despite our varied academic backgrounds, this book has already invited us in and made us comfortable in what could have been the exclusive world of literature centered in Hapsburg, Spain. The appendix invites us in further and seems to challenge us to test her argument, to use our backgrounds and expertise to draw our own connections between one story and the next, and finally, to add to the academic conversation that would secure this genre's place in scholarship. ❊