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Book Review: Approaches to Teaching Early  
Modern Spanish Drama Modern Language  
Association of America, 2006 Edited by Laura R.  
Bass and Margaret R. Greer

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# Book Review: Approaches to Teaching Early Modern Spanish Drama

Modern Language Association of America, 2006 Edited by Laura R. Bass and Margaret R. Greer

## **Abstract**

This volume is the latest in the Approaches series published by the Modern Language Association. As the series editor points out, *The principal objective of the series is to collect within each volume different points of view on teaching a specific literary work, a literary tradition, or a writer widely taught at the undergraduate level.*

Indicative of its title, then, this volume is an assortment of teaching methodologies and perspectives on the early modern comedia by many of the field's most well-known scholars.

## **Disciplines**

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Book and Paper | Higher Education | Illustration | Modern Languages | Technical and Professional Writing

## **Comments**

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“Boricua” literature had *nothing* to do with island literature, and that in fact such a reading linking the two was a colonializing gesture. Furthermore, Sánchez González seems to suggest here that literature is a flawed artistic genre given its limitations as a manifestation of popular (working class, politically engaged) culture and that other cultural forms such as music are by far superior, an odd thing to say after dedicating the previous five chapters to literature.

Chapter six is also confusing in its celebration of salsa as the premier diasporic Boricua cultural production, a claim that is not substantiated in her analysis. In fact, Sánchez González focuses on three non-U.S. centered albums which appeared in 1992: one by the Dominican Juan Luis Guerra and his band 4.40 (an album where the dominant musical genre is not salsa but rather bachata), which is judged favorably; one by a Nuyorican salsa musician (Willie Colón), which focuses on Puerto Rico and also receives accolades; and one by the Panamanian Rubén Blades, which is critiqued for not being political enough (or for being political in an individualist and not collective way) and for being sexist.

To her credit, Sánchez González offers an innovative approach to U.S. Puerto Rican literature and proposes a rather different framework for its interpretation. Her approach is decidedly focused on a small number of exemplary cases which she argues should be canonical. Sánchez González’s text is not a thorough or complete “history” in the traditional sense: she does not analyze the work of many authors who are commonly understood to be cornerstones of this tradition. She also only analyzes narrative texts, arguing that theater and poetry have been largely studied by others and would overburden her efforts. The author also pays no attention to openly gay and lesbian writers and only discusses homophobia in the context of Thomas’s work.

Perhaps the strongest contribution of the book is its effort to integrate critical paradigms and the bibliography of U.S. people of color literary criticism to the study of U.S. Puerto Rican literature. Sánchez González demonstrates a wide knowledge of African American and Na-

tive American criticism in the first four chapters, and dedicates many paragraphs to Chicana and Latina feminist texts in Chapter Five. One often has the impression that in fact this is her implicit audience: English and comparative literature scholars who share her strong post-structuralist, postcolonial theoretical concerns.

*Boricua Literature* is a polemical, difficult book, in which an author who personally feels that her diasporic, leftist, feminist, working-class critical approach has been historically slighted attempts to overturn competing paradigms and establish new theoretical and critical models. Time will tell what the reception to her novel approach will be.

**Lawrence M. La Fountain-Stokes**  
**University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**

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*Approaches to Teaching Early Modern Spanish Drama*

**Modern Language Association of America, 2006**

**Edited by Laura R. Bass and Margaret R. Greer**

This volume is the latest in the *Approaches* series published by the Modern Language Association. As the series editor points out,

The principal objective of the series is to collect within each volume different points of view on teaching a specific literary work, a literary tradition, or a writer widely taught at the undergraduate level.

Indicative of its title, then, this volume is an assortment of teaching methodologies and perspectives on the early modern *comedia* by many of the field’s most well-known scholars.

Part One, written by the editors, Laura R. Bass and Margaret R. Greer, is dedicated to “Materials” and highlights the tools available to university instructors who teach the *comedia*: “Editions of *Comedias*” (anthologies, editions in

Spanish, and bilingual editions), "The Instructor's Library" (background studies, critical and scholarly studies, journals and series), and "Aids to Teaching" (illustrated books, films, internet resources). Though not intended to be comprehensive, this overview provides a fairly complete accounting of the principal resources available today.

Part Two is dedicated to "Approaches" with an introduction by the editors that offers a brief commentary on the corral and the court, and takes up questions of authorship before moving on to the genre's original socio-historical context. The introduction also discusses key questions (some might say "debates") in early modern drama, many of which are featured in subsequent essays: gender studies and otherness, performance, the honor code, women authors, the "Golden Age" vs. "Early Modern" designation for the period, historicity, and transatlantic perspectives, among others.

The first section of Part Two, "The Past in the Present: Historical Framework and Visual Contexts," features essays on historical contextualization (Melveena McKendrick), the Spanish code of honor (Renato Barahona), Italian Renaissance Art and the *comedia* (Frederick A. de Armas), geography and theories of space (Enrique García Santo Tomás), costume and dress (Laura R. Bass), and cinematic adaptations of popular *comedias* (Carmen García de la Rasilla). McKendrick's essay, "Communicating the Past," does a formidable job of contextualizing the *comedia* within its socio-historical moment by discussing such key questions as "honor" and "limpieza de sangre." Barahona's contribution, "Between Ideals and Pragmatism: Honor in Early Modern Spain," is a highly localized and research-oriented study of honor and litigation in the Basque Country which resists some of McKendrick's views.

The second section, "Language, Theory, and (Teaching) Philosophy," includes very good essays on theoretical approaches: using polymetric analysis (Mary Malcolm Gaylord), theories on the *comedia* and graduate education (Edward H. Friedman), Golden Age Women dramatists (Teresa S. Soufas), and moral philosophy and the concept of "desengaño" (Manuel Delgado). Friedman's essay,

"The Comedia and the Theoretical Imperative," provides a "checklist" of topics for instructors to consider when teaching early modern drama to graduate students, and how that list can be transported to the undergraduate classroom. He then goes on to espouse an approach that studies the *comedia* "as a progression that reflects literary history, the theoretical present, and a faith in the critical (and metacritical) skills of graduate students" (85). Whether you advocate Friedman's approach or not, he provides an excellent road map for teaching drama from the very first day.

In the third section, "Theater History, Practice, and Comparative Contexts," essays are dedicated to performance and performance theory (Bruce R. Burningham), teaching non-*comedia* festive drama such as *jácaras* and *entremeses* (Vincent Martin), and comparative approaches: the *comedia* and Shakespeare (Susan L. Fischer), the *comedia* and French theater (Leah Middlebrook), and contrasting the Don Juan figures (James Mandrell). Burningham's essay, "Placing the Comedia in Performative Context," provides a brief, but concise, overview of theater from the Greeks through the Medieval period, before encouraging a class performance of a single play. His suggestion is a good one, but some instructors might not agree to putting so much time into one play at the expense of so many others.

In the Fourth section, "Cross-Cultural Approaches," essays take up issues of race and otherness in the *comedia* (María Antonia Garcés and John Beusterien), teaching drama to non-Spanish majors (Cory A. Reed), and transatlantic approaches to drama written in the Americas (Frederick Luciani) or Spanish plays that grappled with Spain's "American experience" (José R. Cartagena-Calderón). During the past decade or so, *comedia* scholars have become more and more interested in questions of race and gender as well as confronting questions of otherness and imperialism. Although in many cases the essays in this section refer to only a handful of plays, they go a long way toward helping to understand how the issues surrounding the "conquest" and "encounter" were viewed, at least as they were depicted in the *comedia*.

Several essays attempt to address a perceived need for teachers to be innovative in presenting what students may believe to be outdated or stodgy works or authors. In the Fifth and Sixth sections, "Embodied Pedagogies" and "New Technologies," several contributors point out the need to find unique and fashionable methods of instruction centered on the visual and aural. For those reasons, some essays are dedicated to engaging students by constructing electronic editions (Matthew D. Stroud), implementing technology in the classroom (Diane E. Sieber), staging and performing actual plays (Dale J. Pratt and Valerie Hegstrom), or by connecting with students through the use of role play by constructing a mock trial (A. Robert Lauer). Each of these approaches is interesting and engaging, and no doubt in line with the learning styles of today's students. As several of these authors point out, however, employing the latest technological advances or using hip teaching strategies alone will not attract students to the *comedia*, and therefore authors generally point to the need to combine "new" approaches with "old" ones.

The volume also include a Glossary, a Works Cited, an Index of Plays, an Index of Playwrights, and an Index of Names. Each of these are not meant to be exhaustive but rather are a compilation of the terms, concepts, works, authors, scholars and/or plays, etc. mentioned in the volume's essays.

*Approaches to Teaching Early Modern Spanish Drama* is a long-awaited volume that does an excellent job of capturing much of the spirited debate on the varied meanings of the Spanish *comedia* as well as tried-and-true methods of classroom teaching and unique new approaches for engaging students. Indeed, the editors are to be commended for covering so much ground in only one volume. Surely, it will be a valuable tool for any instructor teaching the *comedia*.

**Chad M. Gasta**  
Iowa State University

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***El género chico.***

***Ocio y teatro en Madrid, (1880-1910)***

**Alianza Editorial, 2004**

**Por Carmen del Moral Ruiz**

En 1974, Carmen del Moral Ruiz publicó un libro, *El Madrid de Baroja*, a partir de una polémica tesis doctoral, defendida en el departamento de Historia de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. En su estudio, la autora exploraba la validez de las crudas descripciones de la novelística barojiana de los barrios bajos de Madrid a finales del siglo XIX. Su tesis defendía la verosimilitud de dichas descripciones, las cuales eran apuntaladas con la documentación histórica que aportaba la autora. Se elevaba a la categoría de verdad la descarnada realidad de la clase obrera madrileña decimonónica, deslegitimándose y cuestionándose así la representación romantizada y naturalizada que esas mismas clases habían adquirido en otro de los discursos literarios coetáneos más difundidos: el género chico. Veinte años más tarde, del Moral nos ofrece en *El género chico. Ocio y teatro en Madrid (1880-1910)*, un estudio que documenta el nacimiento, los temas, los autores y la dinámica del género chico desde una perspectiva y metodología históricas.

En un panorama crítico sobre el género chico donde abundan estudios que son exaltaciones nostálgicas carentes de método y criticismo, el libro de del Moral es único en su rigor en la documentación de la sociedad, economía y cultura del siglo diecinueve y su proyección en las tablas a través del espectáculo del género chico. El libro consta de un prólogo y ocho capítulos: cuatro de ellos dedicados a la dinámica de la empresa teatral, uno a los autores de género chico, uno a las obras de tema madrileño y un último a las obras de tema cubano. La autora delimita bien su corpus, "los libretos del género chico, considerando como obras pertenecientes al mismo las que se desarrollan en un acto y se representaban en funciones por horas" y anuncia una deliberada abstracción del componente musical (9). Numerosas estampas y pies de página