

Stephanie Merrim. *The Spectacular City, Mexico and Colonial Hispanic Literary Culture*.

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Thanks to a meticulous analysis of several works by seventeenth-century Spanish American creoles writing about their cities — and in particular about New Spain's Mexico City — Stephanie Merrim narrates the well-known epistemological shift from the Spanish Renaissance ideal of order, uniformity, and totality to the Baroque aesthetics of disillusioned and decentered plurality.

Merrim's *Spectacular City* starts with the analysis of late sixteenth-century texts that still portrayed Mexico City as a model of order, urban planning, and social engineering. For them, in Hispanic American colonial cities reason manifested itself in a hierarchical, architectural order that followed a geometrical design. In his "Epístola al insigne Hernando de Herera" (1597) Eugenio de Salazar y Alarcón was capable, for example, of describing Mexico City as a *locus amoenus* that effortlessly mixed the urban and the pastoral in an exquisite and functional balance.

According to Merrim, the first radical change from this Renaissance urban ideal comes from Bernardo de Balbuena's famous poem "Grandeza Mexicana," first published in 1604, a text that demanded a place for Mexico City among the principal world cities. The poem is also an ode to mercantile capitalism and an ambitious attempt to give a detailed description of the city, emphasizing its wealth and the magnificence of its cultured creole elite. Merrim thinks that while writing "Grandeza," Balbuena confronted himself with the intractable urban complexity of Mexico City and that this fact ultimately undermined his attempt to make his work an example of the new classical poetry. Instead, "Grandeza" became an early example of the New World Baroque aesthetics dismembering the Renaissance harmonious and ordered urban ideal.

Later creole works, like Baltasar Dorantes de Carranza's *Sumaria relación de las cosas de la Nueva España*, written in 1604, would make Balbuena's demand of Spanish recognition their own and would take it even further through their ideological use of the Aztec past as an ideological tool for an incipient creole nationalism. This theatrical, Baroque gesture would reach its apex with two of the most celebrated seventeenth-century creole writers: Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora and Sor

Juana Inés de la Cruz. In his *Teatro de virtudes políticas*, published in 1680, Sigüenza poetically recommends the new viceroy of New Spain to take some of the ancient Aztec emperors as models of what a virtuous government should be. For her part, Sor Juana defends New Spain's Christianity as an almost organic outgrowth of Aztec religious practices in her introductory poem to *El Divino Narciso*, published in 1689.

As is well-known, nowhere does the Baroque epistemological crisis manifest itself most dramatically in Hispanic America than in Sor Juana's famous *Primero Sueño*, published in 1692. There she showed that while human understanding aspires to the unity of knowledge, multiplicity and plurality make the task impossible. In fact, chaos, conflict, and geometrical collapse had become common currency in several creole urban accounts of the time. Writers such as Gregorio Martín de Guijo, Juan Rodríguez Freile, and Bartolomé Arzán e Orsúa y Vela, all would write profusely about scandals, violence, and human sins in the cities of Mexico, Bogotá, and Potosí respectively.

While Merrim is undoubtedly a great interpreter of seventeenth-century creole literary culture, she perhaps schematizes too much the rich sixteenth-century Spanish description of the New World. She uses Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's brief *Sumario de la natural historia de las Indias*, first published in 1526, as a prime example of the Spanish sixteenth-century simplification of the New World's complexity thanks to Oviedo's extensive use of wonder as a familiar and domesticating rhetorical tool. However, she omits Oviedo's other famous work, his *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, whose first part was published in 1535, and which was not published in its final version until the nineteenth century. Oviedo presents there an encyclopedic attempt to narrate, in almost monstrous detail, the complexity, richness, and chaotic plurality of the American continent.

In sum, *The Spectacular City* is a comprehensive and erudite work that will undoubtedly become a common and valuable reference to scholars attempting to understand the complex cultural logic of the Spanish American seventeenth-century colonies. It certainly opens doors for an interesting debate regarding the current place and value of all these pioneer creole attempts to make historical sense of an urban reality that refused to follow any known epistemological category.

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