

## More Than Faded Beauties: Women Theater Managers of Early Modern Spain

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Due to their itinerant life in public, women who worked as actresses and managers in Spanish theater companies in the mid-sixteenth century were relegated to the margins of society and were almost always stigmatized.<sup>1</sup> Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship emphasized this stigma, giving little or no attention to the quality of their work as professionals, their influence on the success of Spain's Golden Age theater, and the true extent of their contributions to the social, cultural, and financial aspects of staging early modern plays. The resulting lack of information is even more notable concerning those women who assumed the role of theater managers: women who conducted the business side of theaters, which consisted in employing, managing, and paying actors; purchasing plays from playwrights; and signing contracts with town councils and other institutions that hired them as performers.

Indeed, when women managers are mentioned, it is to blame them for their shortcomings or, if no documentary evidence to the contrary is available, to claim that they remained but briefly in their positions out of sheer necessity because their beauty had faded.<sup>2</sup> Only recently has this outdated history begun to be challenged, with the recognition of women's contributions to the management, organization, and coordination of theaters throughout the dominions held by the Spanish monarchy.<sup>3</sup> Women's presence in the theaters of the early modern

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Ni espada rota ni mujer que trota* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1993), 189n46.

<sup>2</sup> Narciso Díaz de Escobar and Francisco Lasso de la Vega, *Historia del teatro español; comediantes, escritores y curiosidades escénicas* (Barcelona: Montaner y Simón, 1924), 1:119, 228.

<sup>3</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, "Las autoras de comedias en el siglo XVII: empresarias teatrales en tiempos de Calderón," *Calderón de la Barca y la España del Barroco*, ed. José Alcalá-Zamora and

Hispanic world thus invites us to reflect on the innovations that, both from an artistic and socio-economic perspective, they brought to the theater, not solely as actresses whose physical attributes are still celebrated in current historiographies, but as workers, partners, and organizers of their company's activities, and even as managers of companies of players.

Spanish women's participation in theater is significant, therefore, especially if we compare their roles to those of women in other emerging commercial theaters in Europe, such as in France or England, where there was purportedly little or no participation of women until 1660.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in Spain from 1540 to 1710, approximately 11 per cent of all who directed and managed commercial theatrical performances were women.<sup>5</sup> Their work as entrepreneurs may be divided into three phases: from the mid-sixteenth century to 1586; from approximately 1587 to 1670; and from 1670 to the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

During the first phase, the lack of any regulation of female activity on stage gave theater companies the opportunity to employ single women and wives of male managers, who then shared responsibility with their husbands, although very few became independent managers. The increasing participation of women gave rise to the "Junta de reformación de costumbres" (Conduct Reform Board), created in 1586 to ban them from the stage.<sup>7</sup> During the second period (1587–1670), actresses were obliged by law to subject their professional activity to the control of a man, either their father or husband. The second period begins with the permit dated November 18, 1587 obtained from the Council of Castile by

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Ernesto Berenguer (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, Sociedad Estatal España Nuevo Milenio, 2001), 2:543–79; and Teresa Ferrer Valls, "La mujer en el tablado en el siglo XVII: de actriz a autora," *Damas en el tablado. Actas de las XXXI Jornadas Internacionales de Teatro Clásico de Almagro (1–3 de julio 2008)* (Almagro: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2009), 83–100.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Scott, *Women on Stage in Early Modern France: 1540–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses. Woman and Drama 1660–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Mimma de Salvo, "Sobre el reparto de *El tirano castigado* de Lope de Vega," *Criticón* 87–88–89 (2003): 215–26.

<sup>6</sup> Sanz Ayán, "Las autoras," 545. Although management roles for women actually increased during the War of Succession (1700–14), other than their numbers, there is little information available on the theater practices of the new Bourbon dynasty.

<sup>7</sup> Ignacio Ezquerro Revilla, "La Junta de Reformación de 1586: Tapadas, comedias y vicios cortesanos," *Revista de Historia Moderna* 30 (2012): 267–82.

the Italian company *I Confidenti* that enabled their Italian actresses to perform,<sup>8</sup> which would later set a precedent for local companies. From this date, theater companies were required to obey the *Nueva Recopilación* (New Legal Corpus [NC]) with regard to “honest” and “fallen” women, which specified that no single woman older than fourteen could act on stage.<sup>9</sup> Women belonging to acting companies were therefore obliged to be married in order to be legally recognized as “honest” and enjoy certain rights, although even so they were compelled to always be subordinate to a man.

From the last quarter of the sixteenth century, however, in what appears to be a striking paradox, women are found everywhere managing theaters in full or in part, apparently working freely and independently outside the theoretical patriarchal model.<sup>10</sup> Despite legal requirements preventing women from signing contracts or making commitments, the same legislation granted a permit to the husband allowing the wife to assume such responsibilities, and, if requested by the wife, a judge could compel the husband to provide the permit even if he did not wish to.<sup>11</sup>

Under this law, Juana Bautista de León, widow of the actor Tomás Sánchez, and wife of the theater manager, Jerónimo de Gálvez, employed several actors in her company in Valladolid on October 10, 1571;<sup>12</sup> and Juana Manzano obtained power of attorney from her husband in 1586 so that she could execute any type of contract or payment on his behalf.<sup>13</sup> We see a similar situation with Catalina Hernández de Verdeseca, wife of theater manager Gaspar de Porres, a good friend

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<sup>8</sup> Cristóbal Pérez Pastor, *Nuevos datos acerca del histrionismo español en los siglos XVI y XVII*. Primera Serie (Madrid, Imprenta de la Revista Española, 1901), 20–23.

<sup>9</sup> Based on previous laws and legal compilations, such as the *Leyes de Toro* of 1505, the *Nueva Recopilación*, in force in Castile from 1567, differentiated between “honest” and “fallen” women, offering no protection to the latter; see Enrique Villalba Pérez, *Pecadoras o delincuentes. Delito y género en la Corte (1580–1630)* (Madrid: Calambur, 2004), 45–46. The *Nueva Recopilación* stated that women could not sign or rescind contracts without their husband’s consent nor defend themselves in court without his permission. Only men could initiate legal actions; women could not sell or buy assets, or donate or hire without their husband’s permission, and were able on their own account, only to bear witness and make charitable donations.

<sup>10</sup> Adelina Sarrión Mora, *Beatas y endemoniadas. Mujeres heterodoxas ante la Inquisición, siglos XVI a XIX* (Madrid: Alianza 2003), 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Nueva Recopilación*, vol. 3, 6; and *Leyes de Toro*, Law 59.

<sup>12</sup> Archivo Histórico de Protocolos Notariales de Valladolid [AHPNV], law 515, 10 October 1571.

<sup>13</sup> AHPNV, Prot. 1052, 668.

of Lope de Vega, whose plays he often staged.<sup>14</sup> Although there is no evidence that Catalina acted on stage,<sup>15</sup> she assumed her husband's contractual obligations for starting up his theater company.<sup>16</sup> So did Juana de Villalba, wife of the impresario Baltasar de Pinedo, who between 1605 and 1618 paid employees,<sup>17</sup> bought and sold costumes,<sup>18</sup> collected debts from various entities,<sup>19</sup> and signed for performances.<sup>20</sup> The best-known example is the wife of Juan de Morales Medrano, the famous actress, Jusepa Vaca, who worked between 1602 and 1628.<sup>21</sup> Jusepa obtained power of attorney from her husband to collect money,<sup>22</sup> and together with him, was responsible for payments,<sup>23</sup> purchasing items for the wardrobe,<sup>24</sup> taking out loans,<sup>25</sup> lending money to third parties,<sup>26</sup> and buying houses, such as the one on Lobo Street in Madrid.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John J. Allen, "El autor de comedias Gaspar de Porres," in *Los Teatros comerciales del siglo XVII y la escenificación de la Comedia*, ed. José Ruano de la Haza and John J. Allen (Madrid: Castalia, 1994), 174–82.

<sup>15</sup> Salvo, "Sobre el reparto, 215–26; Ellen M. Anderson, "Playing at Moslem and Christian: The Construction of Gender and the Representation of Faith in Cervantes' Captivity Plays," *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America*. 13.2 (1993): 37–60; Karl Reichenberger and Darío Fernández-Morera, *Cervantes y su mundo* (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2004–5), 239.

<sup>16</sup> Archivo Histórico de Procolos Notariales de Madrid [AHPNM], Prot. 1655, fol. 256; AHPNM, Prot. 1314 n.d., 19 May 1595; AHPNM, Prot. 2265; AHPNM, Prot. 2113; AHPNM, Prot. 1660, fol. 307.

<sup>17</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 1993, fol. 1545, year 1605.

<sup>18</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 2191 fol. 1516; AHPNM, Prot. 2246.

<sup>19</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 2581 fol. 129.

<sup>20</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 2485 fol. 3, 27, April 1618.

<sup>21</sup> The playwright Luis Vélez de Guevara wrote *La Serrana de la Vera* for her, and Lope de Vega praised her acting in *La mocedad de Roldán*, particularly her "dashing figure in a man's garb." Antonio Paz y Meliá, *Catálogo de las piezas de teatro que se conservan en el Departamento de Manuscritos de la Biblioteca Nacional (1899)* (Madrid: Patronato de la Biblioteca Nacional, 1934–35), 474.

<sup>22</sup> Mercedes de los Reyes Peña, "En torno a la actriz Jusepa Vaca," in *Las mujeres en la sociedad española del Siglo de Oro: ficción teatral y realidad histórica. Actas del II Coloquio del Aula-Biblioteca «Mira de Amescua» celebrado en Granada-Úbeda del 7 al 9 de marzo de 1997 y cuatro estudios clásicos sobre el tema*, ed. Juan Antonio Martínez Berbel and Roberto Castilla Pérez (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1998), 81–114.

<sup>23</sup> AHPNM, 25 January 1606 prot. 2194, fol. 1052; 18 March 1619. Prot. 1619, 258, n.p.

<sup>24</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 3910 fol. 265, April 1623.

<sup>25</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 2435, fol. 79. 21 January 1606.

<sup>26</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 4211, 26 March 1612.

<sup>27</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 2350 n.p., 13 May 1628.

These activities, registered in notarial documents, were carried out by other actresses,<sup>28</sup> among whom the most well-known are María de los Ángeles (1610 and 1623); Jerónima de Burgos (1614 and 1632); María de Córdoba, the famous “Amarilis” (1630); Mariana de Chaves (1622), who shared power with her son, not her husband; and Jerónima de Herrera (1649), who worked as a theater impresario not only on the Iberian peninsula but also in the Hispanic–Italian dominions of Messina and Palermo.<sup>29</sup>

All these women’s activities were financial as well as artistic, and demonstrate that they were capable of managing a theater company on their own, without their husbands. Documentary sources of widowed female managers further show that they took on extensive management functions, such as hiring actors, arranging performances, and overseeing financial accounts.

In the third and final phase, from 1670 to the end of the seventeenth century, several famous successful actresses became not only the partners of theater managers, or accidental impresarios through widowhood, but independent theater managers. They were frequently sought after as managers of theater groups, both by the actors they managed, like Antonia Manuela Sevillano in 1683,<sup>30</sup> or by those desiring theatrical services, such as Francisca Bezón that same year,<sup>31</sup> and María Álvarez in 1691, at the request of King Carlos II; indeed, she was such a favorite of the king that he asked that her company stay in Madrid and act in the Royal Palace rather than tour the countryside.<sup>32</sup> Occasionally they demonstrated their professional independence, whether married or single, by forming a practical school of actress–managers, since most of them had formerly worked in companies headed by women,<sup>33</sup> and had seen how others had successfully

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<sup>28</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, *Hacer escena. Capítulos de Historia de la empresa teatral en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2013), 266–75.

<sup>29</sup> Elvira González Asenjo, *Don Juan José de Austria y las artes, 1629–1679* (Madrid: Fundación Instituto de Empresa, 2005), 119.

<sup>30</sup> AHPNM, leg. 12,800, fol. 79 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, “To Conquer Paris: Spanish Actresses at the Court of Louis XIV (1660–1674),” *Gender Crossings From and To Spain: Early Modern Women’s Influence on National Theaters*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and María Cristina Quintero (forthcoming, Ashgate).

<sup>32</sup> N. D. Shergold and John Varey, *Representaciones palaciegas 1603–1699* (London: Tamesis, 1982), 18–84.

<sup>33</sup> Protocol archives hold many unexplored but accurate documents that provide evidence for the existence of a not insignificant number of women theater managers. Among the best-known are Fabiana Laura (1669 and 1691), Magdalena López (1671–80), Inés Gallo (1677–78), María Jacinta (1669), Francisca López (1660–63), María Álvarez (1680–92), Ángela Barba (1683–87),

managed a theater company before them.<sup>34</sup>

The reasons for the increase in women managers during this third phase are various. Court theater became firmly established from the second half of the seventeenth century, and a greater number of theater repertoires depended on actresses with multiple talents who could act, sing, and dance.<sup>35</sup> “Commercial” court theater, i.e., performances designed for the palace but adapted to the “corrales” or public courtyards,<sup>36</sup> included lengthy singing and dancing roles that called attention to the actresses. Their visibility and popularity opened doors for them in management, and enabled them to circumvent legal controls that heretofore prevented women from independently assuming these professional responsibilities.

Spain’s deep economic crisis during the decades of 1670, 1680, and 1690 gravely affected theater finances,<sup>37</sup> as was demonstrated by the managers’ petitions to the court treasury for payment for performances and their frequent imprisonment for debt.<sup>38</sup> Yet the court could hardly subsist without entertainment, nor could the towns and villages be deprived of their Corpus Christi plays. These circumstances may have triggered the upsurge in women assuming management roles. In this context, companies managed by women had some advantages over those led by men. For example, a company headed by a famous actress might have lower payroll costs. Since famous actresses who were also talented singers and dancers could charge three times as much as a leading man, it was usual for male

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Francisca Bezón (1683–84), Ana Isabel de Castro (1693–96), Juana de Cisneros (1668–69), Bárbara Coronel (1676), Francisca Correa (1681), María de la Cruz (1671), María de Enríquez (1690), Serafina Manuela (1680), Ángela de León (1667 and 1688), Eufrosia María de Reina (1682–85), Teresa de Robles (1686–1701) (Buezo, 1998, 117–119), Andrea de Salazar (1695–96), Jerónima de Sandoval (1701–3), Antonia Manuela Sevillano (1683–84), Margarita de Zuazo (1673–75), Paula María de Rojas (1691) Manuela Pereira (1692), María Navarro (1701), María de Navas (1701); and Juana María de Ondarro (1705–12)

<sup>34</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, *Hacer escena. Capítulos de Historia de la empresa teatral en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 2013), 285–92.

<sup>35</sup> Danièle Becker, “El teatro palaciego y la música en la segunda mitad del siglo XVII,” in *Actas del IX Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas* (Berlin: Vervuert, 1989), 1:353–64.

<sup>36</sup> Héctor Urzáiz Tortajada, “El desvergonzado en Palacio: Los graciosos de las comedias mitológicas,” *Acotaciones. Revista de Investigación Teatral* 17 (2006): 1–38.

<sup>37</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, “La crisis económica durante el reinado de Carlos II y su influencia en el mundo del teatro,” *Diálogos Hispánicos de Amsterdam* 8.3 (1989): 649–67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

impresarios to have a wife or daughter play the role of “prima donna,” not having to pay her so the costs did not become burdensome. If, however, the female manager also played the roles of leading or third lady — the most important female roles — one of the highest salaries was eliminated and the troupe could in addition count on a popular actress for the roles.<sup>39</sup>

Companies fully or partially managed by women were also protected from many financial problems that might occur through their husbands’ mishandling, such as nonpayment of debts. The laws that regulated the earnings paid by the husband to the wife, therefore, prohibited the confiscation of property from one spouse to pay for debts incurred by the other.<sup>40</sup> The wife, like a minor, had to be shielded from the harmful effects of non-payment by the head of the family. Starting from the reign of Alfonso XI (1325–50), a general consensus was established that women were not obliged to forfeit their assets to pay for their husband’s debts or bonds, even though they had signed a contract of joint liability, the kind of contract almost always signed by wives of actors or theater managers. For this reason, a clause was always included expressly waiving the laws that protected them.<sup>41</sup> However, even when a woman gave her assets over to a third party by signing this contract, its waiver could be annulled. The power granted to theater manager and actress Manuela de Escamilla dated in 1673, testifies to the various situations in which waivers could be revoked:<sup>42</sup> the woman could claim that she had signed under duress, threat of harm, or deceit; she could also request special judges, including the Papal Nuncio or the Pope, for absolution to regain legal protection.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, women could only be imprisoned for debts arising from direct or serious crime, or if they were proved to be “fallen,” i.e., immoral.<sup>44</sup> Punishment was applied for more than moral reasons: if rumors of loose sexual behavior could be verified, actresses were automatically stripped of legal rights and their persons and assets could be seized. This explains why women in the theater

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<sup>39</sup> Shergold and Varey, *Representaciones palaciegas*, 880.

<sup>40</sup> NC, 9:10; LT, Law 1505, 77.

<sup>41</sup> These laws, based on the Roman *Senadoconsulto Velejano* of 46 CE, made null and void any financial obligation contracted by a wife. It defended those who “through their weakness” had committed their assets as guarantee for others’ debts.

<sup>42</sup> Agustín de la Granja, “De Manuela de Escamilla y de otras autoras de Comedias,” *Cuadernos de Historia Moderna* 27 (2002): 217–39.

<sup>43</sup> AHPNM, Prot. 5223 fol. 558 r,v.

<sup>44</sup> NC, 3:10.

defended themselves in court from such charges whenever possible. For instance, when the daughter of theater manager Jerónimo Velázquez was defamed by her ex-lover, the famous playwright Lope de Vega, in his poems and in several of his plays, the accusations directly affected the company, which was the mainstay of the flourishing Madrid theater. Velázquez, who had much to lose if the rumors were proven true, did not solely defend his honor when, banking on his political ties, he defended his daughter against Lope. He won the court case against the playwright, who was exiled from Madrid.<sup>45</sup>

Not only for aesthetic purposes, then, but for real business reasons, women who acted and managed theaters were essential assets when they participated in acting companies and took on their financial risks. Their involvement in employing actors, contracting with city councils to stage plays, and buying costumes and plays from playwrights guaranteed the success of a company. Moreover, the protection offered their personal property from seizure for non-payment of debts reduced the financial risks of loans and investments during the theater's off-season. Despite the restrictions that remained for them when acting and managing theaters, therefore, all these reasons combined to assure women's prominent role in Spain's early modern theater.

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<sup>45</sup> Carmen Sanz Ayán, "Jerónimo Velázquez. Un hombre de teatro en el período de gestación de la Comedia Barroca," *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Madrid, UNED, Serie IV 5* (1992): 97–134.