

Lisa Nalbone. *The Novels of Carmen Conde. Towards an Expression of Feminine Subjectivity.* Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2012. 161 pp. ISBN 978-1-588871-313-2.

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The first woman elected in 1979 to the notoriously chauvinistic Spanish Royal Academy, Carmen Conde, poet, novelist, dramatist, writer of children's literature, and active literary critic, was a creative force to be reckoned with in Spain throughout the vicissitudes in her life in the years marked by the demise of the monarchy under Alfonso XIII, the Second Republic and the Civil War, and, finally, in the transition to democracy. That said, given Conde's early literary debut in Juan Ramón Jiménez's little magazines *Ley* and *Obra en marcha*, and how she herself characterized the years from 1939-1979 as "Exilio voluntario, y 40 años de aguante con dignidad y valor y obra", it is perhaps small wonder that Conde's introspective poetry has received far more critical attention than her novels. Lisa Nalbone deserves credit indeed not only for being the first to write a full-length study on Conde's eight novels published between 1945 and 2002, but also for presenting her ideas in a thoroughly researched account of Conde's achievement as a novelist at a time when neither women authors nor their female subjects were given equal consideration with their male counterparts.

Not perhaps surprisingly the optic here is decidedly feminist as Nalbone concentrates on Conde's female protagonists' plural searches for independence, satisfaction, and fulfillment (or not) in their individual struggles against fierce patriarchal stereotyping of female behavior concerned, particularly, with desire, domesticity, motherhood, and achieving personal autonomy. Inevitably, interest centers on the main character in each of the chosen novels but, far from applying a single thematic straitjacket, Nalbone's exegesis does allow for Conde's own aging process over the years, both as a woman and as a writer, to take in the inevitable shifts (such as absence and death) in the particular relationship(s) described. Highly structured, this study is divided into three parts that concentrate on: "The Lyric Subject" (with reference to *Vidas contra su espejo*, *En manos del silencio* and *Las oscuras raíces*, which deal with inner conflict, difficult relations within the family, and violent deaths); "The Subject

Transformed” (taking in *La Rambla* and *Creció espesa la yerba*, and particularly interesting for the vivid accounts of middle-age, memory, and reassessing the past); and, perhaps the most interesting, “The Self-Manumitted Subject” (dealing with *Soy la madre*, outlining one character’s idiosyncratic but total commitment to mothering and her gradual liberation from selflessness and martyrdom in a clear movement towards self-realization; and coupled thematically with the complex and enigmatic *Virginia o la calle de balcones*, published posthumously in 2002, which uses dream sequences to good effect to outline a middle-aged woman’s fears about the viability of her relationship with a much younger man). In each case the critical discussion begins with comments on the circumstances of the actual writing of the text and adds a useful review of the contemporary reception of each of the novels. Finally, Nalbone adds a handy *vademecum* for the reader composed of plot summaries of all eight novels, a comprehensive list of works cited, and an index of proper names. The net result is the deciphering of a complex set of images of modern Spanish women driven by an intense desire to break out of the molds of enforced gender bias and/or nominative behavior as Spain simultaneously moves from dictatorship to democracy.

This purely Spanish context is widened by the author’s impressive and international list of readings in contemporary feminist scholarship as she cites a “latitudinous range of writings that crosses centuries and continents, [which] include the advancement or interpretation of feminism in its multiple waves of women” (18). Most of the authors on her list are well-known to those familiar with compulsory graduate school readings in North American universities (e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Luce Irigaray, Lidia Falcon, Helene Cixous, Adrienne Rich Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks and Toril Moi). However, the point here worthy of note is *not* that Nalbone is forcing some hardcore interpretation on Conde’s work but rather is she citing how her *own* rich background serves her in the business of explicating how Conde’s models, both in her literary friendships with other women writers and her reluctance to embrace *a priori* concepts, often produce “models of revised codes of femininity through the negation of what they are not” (19). The point is well-taken. Nalbone wisely does not try to sell Conde as a dedicated *feminist* but rather as a determined narrator of the female condition, fraught, as she herself experienced it, with obstacles and pitfalls. In doing so she pays worthy homage to Conde’s dedication to her art.

Nevertheless, the important issue of for *whom* Conde wrote is not treated in depth here. Her novels have much in them that may be compared to the violent images, histrionic wailing, and blood-and-thunder details of the popular press and certain pot-boilers of their time –in and of itself a detail of interest. While it may be enjoyable to trace “Lacanian undertones” (46) and “Kristevian echoes” the fact remains that Conde very cannily wrote to be read. Further investigation of the archives of Conde’s personal library and letters, diaries, photographs, recordings, and personal papers as well as her own literary corpus that she generously donated to the treasure trove that is the

Patronato Carmen Conde-Antonio Oliver in Cartagena, Spain and which, as Nalbone rightly remarks, has yet to be fully explored, may well yield more interesting light on the matter.

On all counts, however, this is a piece of serious scholarship deserving of our close attention. If not the last word on Conde's prose works, it will serve to inspire further dialogue on Conde's corpus *as a whole* from even more fruitful points of view.