

[Bowers on Juárez Almendros, 'Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature: Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints'](#)

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The following book review from H-Disability may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Reviewer:

Kristy Wilson Bowers

Encarnación Juárez Almendros. *Disabled Bodies in Early Modern Spanish Literature: Prostitutes, Aging Women and Saints*. Cambridge: Liverpool University Press, 2018. 216 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78694-078-0.

Reviewed by Kristy Wilson Bowers (University of Missouri) **Published on** H-Disability (July, 2019) **Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

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The inferior status of women in the patriarchal societies of early modern Europe has long been analyzed by scholars from a variety of disciplines. In this work, Encarnación Juárez-Almendros takes a fresh approach to the topic, examining female embodiment in early modern Spain through a combined lens of feminist and disability theories. Focusing specifically on sixteenth-century Spanish texts, she offers evidence that “the traditional notions and segregation of female bodies, considered imperfect and inferior in comparison to the prototype of the corporeal male, constitute a major paradigm of disability in the period” (p. 1). In support of this argument, she examines a wide range of texts including medical and behavioral treatises; fictional stories, plays, and poems; and the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila (1515-82).

In four chapters, the author moves through a variety of different textual genres. After an introduction that offers a contextualization and historiography of both feminist and disability theories, the first chapter examines the foundation of this view of women as disabled, through the lens of nonfiction texts. These include anatomical and medical manuals (primarily those focused on *morbo gálico*, or syphilis), and several well-known prescriptive/proscriptive texts including those of Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540) on poverty (*De subventionem pauperum*, 1525) and on the ideal woman (*De Institutione Feminae Christianae*, 1523) and Cristóbal Pérez de Herrera’s (1558-1625) treatise on welfare reform (*Amparo de pobres*, 1598). Juárez-Almendros pulls from these to demonstrate the Western traditions of female inferiority on a biological/scientific/medical level and how that manifested in elite (i.e., textual) cultural/social/moral norms of behavior. In the second chapter, Juárez-Almendros examines

the literary treatment of women, specifically in relation to the “syphilitic trope” in which the contagion of syphilis acts as a “gendered metaphor of physical and moral decay” (p. 56). Syphilis, she argues, became a metaphor in literary texts “for describing a conception of women’s bodies as defective and chaotic” (p. 74). In the third chapter Juárez-Almendros turns to the literary treatment of the aging female body. Here she argues for a chronological shift from the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century, in which literature depicted aging/aged women in increasingly marginalized terms, and they lost their “wise” status to be characterized only as dangerous. They become “the excess, the menace and the detritus that needs to be discarded for the health of society” (p. 107). In the fourth and final chapter, the author turns to a singular text, the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila. Here, she focuses on the question of Teresa’s possible epilepsy (an argument of modern scholars), arguing for the lived experience of one woman able to overcome both her own true physical disability and society’s projected gendered disability to successfully control the narrative of her physical and spiritual experiences.

Juárez-Almendros’s work demonstrates the usefulness of the lens of feminist disability theory as a new way to examine the premodern perception of women. She calls upon an excellent range of historical, sociological, and literary sources to frame and bolster her argument that “women and the disabled symbolize imperfection, corruption, impurity and, ultimately, human vulnerability” (p. 1). This reviewer was left uncertain about the breadth of her argument, however. In addition to the above statement, she goes on in the conclusion, for example, to affirm that the work has “uncovered the particularities of early modern Spanish disability by exposing the negative construction of female bodies” (p. 168). Her focus, though, is really only upon a subset of women: the poor, ill (mostly syphilitic), aged, “unruly” (a term she applies frequently), and morally flawed. Did this perception of imperfection and corruption then apply to all women (as seems to be implied in the introduction and conclusion) or were some able to avoid or escape this trope? The construction of disability seems predicated on a confused tangle of not only gender but also age, health, religion, and socioeconomic status.

The analysis is at its strongest in the second and third chapters, both of which nicely analyze a variety of literary sources. The final chapter, focusing on Teresa of Ávila’s autobiography, however, seems at odds with the overall thesis. Juárez-Almendros ably addresses the debates over how scholars have and should understand or approach this particular autobiography, and the problems associated with it as an historical text. The inclusion of a historical figure is appropriate and useful, but given her previous arguments for the disregard and fear in which (some) women’s bodies were held, her analysis of Teresa of Ávila’s text seems somewhat out of place. Ávila’s text documents her success in overcoming her disabilities and framing her experiences of both illness and gender to render herself sainted rather than demonic. In this case, even the twin disabilities of gender and illness do not render her dangerous or marginalized, but rather embraced and a spiritual leader. Further discussion of the dichotomy of lived experience versus literary texts would be helpful to better contextualize this disjuncture in the chapters.

Finally, this work is a welcome addition to studies on early modern Spanish culture. It nicely opens up the wide range of potential sources for examining cultural ideas about embodiment. Additional analysis of what made Spain a unique cultural context, however, would have been helpful. Despite constant references to Spanish culture and Spanish discourses, there is little context offered to make clear to what extent these texts reflect a unique Spanish mind-set or whether Spanish texts simply

are serving as exemplars of broader European trends in the sixteenth century.

These larger issues of framing and context notwithstanding, Juárez-Almendros offers an intriguing analysis of the textual tradition marginalizing and disabling women in early modern Spain. Her thought-provoking analysis of how we can read these premodern texts should be of interest in scholars in wide range of fields and should spark further conversations about early modern women's embodiment.

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