

Michael Kidd, *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain: Three Key Plays in Translation*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2023, xiv + 337 pp.
(Reviewed by Jasen Rodríguez, Texas State University)

Michael Kidd's most recent publication, *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain: Three Key Plays in Translation* (2023) is an indispensable resource for Golden Age drama scholarship and performance, guiding the reader through the structure, ideology, and language of the Spanish secular *Comedia*, where the imagination of three early modern playwrights meets the representational conventions of the historically marginalized Black Spaniard. The wide scope of the 103-page introduction, coherently divided into 4 main sections (Historical and Literary Contexts, Biographical Sketches [of the authors of the triad of plays], Literary Analysis, and a Translator's Note) lends itself for use in the literature classroom without losing its readability for an audience more focused on making scripts come to life on the stage. It is a careful analysis of sources both contemporary and posterior to the principal works studied with illuminating quotes from figures as well known as Cervantes to more obscure names (for the non-specialist), all woven together as the essential foreground for the drama emerging from the perception of blackness during early modernity.

In the first major section of the introduction, Kidd tracks how Black characters in Spanish golden age drama enter more prevalently onto the stage as a secondary consequence of the growing trade of enslaved persons (18). This context, of course, entails the one-dimensional, stereotypical representations unfortunately determined by a centuries-long tradition of ridiculing marginalized groups. Black characters, in a way similar to the pimp, the Basque, and the clown, have occupied a cultural space characterized by caricature and social exclusion (29). A most noteworthy precursor of the type of representations found in the Triad author's plays is explored (namely, the analysis of 3 plays attributed to Lope de Vega from pages 32-42), though the focus is certainly on the inversion of the limited depth of Black characters so natural to early modern Spanish drama demonstrated in the works Gil Vicente and Lope de Rueda (32).

Kidd's elaboration of the role of the *bozal* dialect at several points of the introduction (but first discussed at length in this section) bestows the reader, whether scholar or performer, with a knowledge that appreciates the evolution of Black characters from being represented on stage in a mere comedic light (usually for the sake of a play's extension) to the forgoing of the almost always comically unintelligible broken speech for "an elegant classical Spanish indistinguishable from that of their noble white counterparts" (33).

In the second major section of the introduction, common historical threads and trends between the Triad authors are explored in order to lay bare some interpretative possibilities the plays may afford the critic and student alike.

The historical attention to detail in the scarce plays of Diego Jimenez de Enciso, for example, is juxtaposed with the minimal information known about the author of *Juan Latino* (suggested by Kidd, according to his research, to have been a descendant of Jewish converts). Special focus, however, is paid to the involvement of DJE in slave-trafficking ventures not at all uncommon to a man of his time and of a politically favorable status such as his (43-44). An important connection between the Triad authors comes to light in the biographical research done on Andrés de Claramonte y Carroy: the appearance of praise given to the other two in a book authored by ACC. (48). Kidd further binds the authors to a kind of aesthetic consensus through his discovery that all three of the Triad authors attended the Count of Saldaña's literary academy (51).

The reconciliation of each of these plays featuring Black protagonists is established by shedding light on biographical coincidences between the three, namely that the Triad authors all spawn from "non-noble or questionable backgrounds" (53), suggesting a tie between their experienced social stigma with that of their Black protagonists and, moreover, their literary and staged representations to be considered as evidence of an internal struggle made manifest. Their shared business in Sevilla makes for an undeniable influence of the city's enormous reliance on slavery, compared with a seemingly unremarkable presence in the interior and a totally negligible population, if any, in the north (53), inevitably inspiring greater representation of Black people on stage and, in part due to this increased visibility, motivating the authors to provide these characters with great psychological depth. To conclude this section, Kidd, returning to the question of the chronology, insists that it is less important than the consideration of the short window of time (1623-1624) in which these works could have been written, pointing to its significance as a sound interpretation of the possibility of collaboration, in some way, between these authors towards a common goal of their works.

In the third and longest major section of the introduction, several established themes and tropes associated with the representation of Black characters at the time are investigated in order to, once more, bring together all three plays under a critical banner, though, as Kidd argues, such an endeavour isn't to suggest that these plays are merely of interest because of what their protagonists may signify on a racial studies axis (56). Regarding *Juan Latino*, he remarks at length about the merits of the learned enslaved person as adhering, to a great extent, to the biographical information known of the real-life Juan Latino (61). On the other hand, he notes how, disappointingly, despite an outstanding knowledge of Latin, Juan Latino's utility to the king is valued more than the possibility of him being humanely liberated as a material demonstration of the supposed appreciation of the titular character's scholastic talents (64).

The mistreatment of Black people in *The Brave Black Soldier*, however, has nothing to do with debates regarding the ethics of slavery, caught up, perhaps, in Juan de Encino's work as a necessary reflection of his personal involvement in the trafficking and ownership of enslaved persons. In Claramonte's play, Kidd argues, the protagonist has demonstrable proof (however inaccurate given the historical data regarding the inheritance of status as an enslaved person) that he was never enslaved, and thus the action, and specifically his character's treatment by his white compatriots, is to be understood as discriminatory only along the basis of color (71), paving the way also for his full embrace of a daring nature that is to justify him as a worthy contributor to the mission of the crown (72). The novelty of such a view was, as Kidd points out, to cause such a scandal as to prompt the censoring of the most outstanding achievements of Juan Mérida: that of marrying his former owner, a white noble, and his induction into the Order of Santiago (74).

The complex space of the Black protagonist's exploits is further nuanced by Kidd's analysis of various distasteful comments made by Juan Mérida, ranging from antisemitic to homophobic in nature, a conscious move by the playwright aiming to make the titular character more appealing to a white European audience that would read his treatment of these other marginal figures as a signaling of an adequate participation/membership of the dominant social group, described in general by Kidd as "reactionary", complicating previously established color-coded language tropes by associating his blackness with the righteous efforts of Catholics to counteract the bleak whiteness of Protestant rebellion. (75-76).

A contrast is made between the worlds of *Juan Latino*, *The Brave Black Soldier* and *Virtues Overcome Appearances* in the analysis of the latter. The reader is made aware earlier in the introduction that Vélez de Guevara's play's importance

is such that it undoubtedly was used by Calderón de la Barca for the redaction of *La vida es sueño*. However, its merits are perhaps even more deserving of critical attention thanks to Kidd's framing of *Virtues Overcome Appearance's* shocking thought experiment of a world without even the most minor of Black characters being disrupted by the birth of a Black prince (81). Describing Filipo's discovery of his blackness as an "anti-Narcissus moment" and alluding to Lacanian psychoanalysis to corroborate its profound effect on him, a suggestion is made more than once that this scene in particular might reflect a deep truth about the playwright's self-hatred as a Jew (86). The strength of the play's resolution (an interracial marriage between a Black man and noble white woman, common amongst the three plays) is measured by Kidd against the perplexing oppositions it suggests at once (91), which, much like questions relevant to our times, as he will come to suggest in the concluding remarks of this section, will continue to produce the conflict necessary for creation in the performing arts.

A well-written synthesis of the ideas presented not only in this particular section, but as a summation of all of Kidd's commentary throughout the introduction up to this point, the conclusion brings the literary analysis section to a close, not without leaving some questions for the reader to ponder as he eventually reaches the translated plays. Ultimately, determining a final interpretation of the Triad author's writing of Black protagonists and their contexts, given the ambiguous response of critical literature, as Kidd suggests, doesn't seem fruitful (97). Instead, the work of the reader is meant to resolve this critical ambiguity by way of speaking the tension filled lines which initially "captivated and unsettled" early modern audiences (98), in the hopes of continuing a dialogue initiated by the Triad authors.

The fourth and final section of the introduction, the translator's notes, is decidedly brief. As Kidd points out, a great deal of his translating philosophy has been spelled out in other works of his, not to mention at many other points in the introduction itself (99). Among the most important issues addressed are the following: the prose rendering of the majority of the *comedias'* Spanish verses, doubling both as a practical solution to some irreconcilable issues of translation between the languages in verse and a modest perspective of his work as a translator; documenting the textual transmission of each of the three works, work that was notably more difficult in the case of *The Brave Black Soldier* (100); the demarcation of scenes according to opposing European and Anglo-American theatre traditions; important racial terms and the *bozal* dialect (discussed at an earlier point of this review); and finally, the translation of the wordplay and various puns in the manuscripts consulted for this work.

Michael Kidd has opened the door with *Black Protagonists of Early Modern Spain* not only for further critical discussion on Black representation in the early modern period but to performances that will be able to apply the great historical research and analytical insight he has provided in the introduction. It is truly exciting to imagine how much interdisciplinary work he has facilitated thanks to his fabulous translations and commentary. The work is a must have not only in any Golden Age Theatre course, but in courses which survey Spanish literature at large, surveys of World or European literature, Modern literature courses, and, surely, any literature course that is designed to discuss works where Black characters are the focal point of a larger societal drama.

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