

Convent Theatre

By Katherine Willis, BYU student

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Date: _____

Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify some of the restrictions and liberties associated with convent life and theater.
- Students will be able to understand the themes used in convent theater.

Materials needed:

- Convent pictures
- Sor Marcela picture

Activities:

Procedure
Warm-up/Hook: Teacher led discussion - How many of you would cut off all of your hair? What would you be willing to cut off your hair for? If it were a requirement to let you into school? To be in a band?
Nuns are women who had cut off all of their hair when they took their vows and entered convents.
Discussion: Show pictures of a convent. Ensure that students know what a convent is. (What is it, why people went there, what they did?)
How was the convent similar to school? Share the following quote from them that comes from the attached essay at the end of this lesson plan:
“Dedication to God through separation from the secular world led to the time that could be dedicated to writing plays. ‘Since the nuns were to spend the greater part of any given day in solitude and silence, the many hours once spent in frivolous contact with people of society and each other could be spent in quiet contemplation, which in turn resulted in pages of material for manuscripts, including poetry, and plays.’”
Who has a super hero? Make the analogy of how super heroes are able to do things we cannot,

and so do the characters of the plays for the nuns in the convent.

Activity: Discuss the following (taken from the attached essay).

“It is important to remember that Sor Marcela’s audience, while obviously nuns by profession, were also women – human beings – subjected to the daily worries, doubts, stresses of suppressing and controlling thoughts, actions, and impulses.’ (Mulroney) And it is in the recognition of such that we find the power of convent theater. Women were able to maintain their sacred nature while having a venue of expression that was not limited to the occurrences within the walls of the convent. They explored themes, and situations while remaining dedicated. The themes of ‘Muerte del Apetito’ convey life within and outside of the convent. ‘Sor Marcela’s metaphors connote the religious doctrine within which the nuns lived, yet are expressed in a decidedly earthly, immediate context.’ (Mulroney) **The theater ‘may be ... a sincere attempt to instruct novices and provide them with an appropriate model of behavior.’** But also perhaps more importantly it provided a great venue for education and expression. ‘Her plays presented characters symbolizing monastic discipline and the **lessons nuns had to learn in order to live a life of spiritual perfection, material abnegation, and detachment from earthly matters and pleasures.**’ (Evangelisti) Although the majority of the plays commented on monastic life in a way which was to uplift and inspire, **humor played a role in commentary and mild criticism of convent life.**

After explaining the themes of convent theater. Ask the class for examples of movies/stories/etc. that they are familiar with that teach appropriate behavior/values (i.e. Veggie Tales, George Washington cutting down the apple tree, Aesop’s Fables, etc.)

Activity: Divide students into small groups; assign each group to act out a short skit. Each skit should have the purpose of teaching some appropriate behavior/value. Encourage students to show extremes of both the behavior/value being used and it not being used (proper etiquette vs. bad manners, asking a girl on a date in both socially acceptable and unacceptable ways, etc.)

Activity: Tell students that they will soon see a play called *La muerte del apetito*, which was a play performed in convents. It was written by Sor Marcela, the daughter of the famous playwright, Lope de Vega. (Show picture of Sor Marcela)

The play is about Alma, a character who represents all people. Throughout the play, Apetito attempts to persuade Alma to give into doing things that are wrong, while two of her friends try to encourage her to do what is right. This play was performed at the convent to teach the nuns that they “like Alma, may conquer corporeal desires through spiritual perseverance.’ (Mulroney, see essay below)

Instruct students that they will do a word search with important terms from the play they will see. The teacher should explain what each term means in reference to the play (see teacher’s version of the word search.)

Convents



Image 1: <http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/L/A-Robert.R.Lauer-1/SorMarceladeSanFelix.gif>



Image 2: (this is the same building but a different picture)
<http://www.dkimages.com/discover/previews/874/50098422.JPG>

Sor Marcela



Image 3:

<http://www.oroz.com/imagenes/thumbails/thumbails01/019085.jpg>

Convent Theater

WORD PUZZLE

T B J M S Y A N S F V L V Z T
H S C E Q O R P W L S J N E E
E N L B B P R O E I L T C D M
M U I U U E A M G T X A A U P
E N G R T F Q L A E I M W N T
S N I A P S O W M R L T M S A
A T E G Q D H H W A C L O E T
Y H Z X E N C X S U N E A D I
T D N O I S S E R P X E L R O
M O R T I F I C A C I O N A N
E O S P I C O N V E N T D E J
Y B Q S U Z Q T Y W D B B V Q
O N R O W Y U L P P F A O Z E
Y Q Q Y T W B L E E R H U E Q
V D J L I C O W J F L V Y K M

ALLEGORY
ALMA
APETITO
CONVENT
DESNUDEZ
EXPRESSION
MORTIFICACION
NUNS
PURITY
SIGLO DE ORO
SOR MARCELA
SPAIN
TEMPTATION
THEATER
THEMES
WALLS

Convent Theater

WORD PUZZLE

(Teacher's Version)

T B J M S Y A N S F V L V Z T
H S C E Q O R P W L S J N E E
E N L B B P R O E I L T C D M
M U I U U E A M G T X A A U P
E N G R T F Q L A E I M W N T
S N I A P S O W M R L T M S A
A T E G Q D H H W A C L O E T
Y H Z X E N C X S U N E A D I
T D N O I S S E R P X E L R O
M O R T I F I C A C I O N A N
E O S P I C O N V E N T D E J
Y B Q S U Z Q T Y W D B B V Q
O N R O W Y U L P P F A O Z E
Y Q Q Y T W B L E E R H U E Q
V D J L I C O W J F L V Y K M

ALLEGORY A symbolic story. Each character in this play represents an abstract idea of either a virtue or a vice.

ALMA The main character in *La muerte del apetito*. She represents all people.

APETITO In the play he represents temptation and constantly tries to tempt Alma.

CONVENT Where nuns live. This play was performed in convents by nuns.

DESNUDEZ She represents the virtue of being without guile. She tries to help Alma fight Apetito's temptations.

EXPRESSION The actors of this play use a lot of expression to show you who their characters are.

MORTIFICACION She is a character in the play that is the virtue of self-denial. She tries to help Alma fight Apetito's temptations.

NUNS Catholic women who devote their lives to God's service.

PURITY This is a virtue that is mentioned in the play. It means purity.

SIGLO DE ORO The 16th and 17th Centuries of Spain, known as the "Golden Age."

SOR MARCELA She wrote the play *La muerte del apetito* (*Death of Appetite*) and was the daughter of the famous playwright Lope de Vega.

SPAIN

TEMPTATION

THEATER

THEMES This play has several themes, one of which is that we must overcome our vices and replace them with virtues.

WALLS In Spanish Golden Age Theater, there was no 4th wall, meaning the actors would interact with the audience. Feel free to interact with the actors when you see them!

Within and Without Walls

by Katherine Willis

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“During the 17th century in Spain, theatrical production was typically a male enterprise: the vast majority of the playwrights, directors, and producers of drama were men. Sor Marcela’s drama, however ran parallel to the comedia tradition, and was not subject to the same set of variables as the popular theater. Thus the circumstances surrounding the performance of “Muerte del Apetito” allow a unique moment to consider theatrical production from a feminist perspective” (Mulroney). A unique aspect of Spanish Golden Age theater includes “convent” theater. Because of its atmosphere, convent theater brings to light a unique style of theater as well as the ability to discuss unique religious themes, especially with consideration of the actors and audience. Many of these themes can be seen in Sor Marcela’s “Muerte del Apetito.” Although the convent may not be the conventional outlet for theater production, it gives a new perspective on how the location meets the needs of its audience.

“The dramatic act would have allowed nun to participate, if only for a brief time, in a ritual deviated from the rigors of their daily routine.” The roles of writer, actor, or participant of any sort in the theater, provided a period a time of relief and relaxation. “Drama, even convent drama, is a public act meant for diversion.” (Arnal and Schlau) The limits and confines of the convent provided some obstacles in the performance of the dramas which the nuns themselves had produced. The plays were often very detailed in the way in which they were to be performed as well as the props that should be used. The plays often included stage directions, as well as

detailed character descriptions. Contrary to what may have been viewed as acceptable, the plays often involved cross-dressing as the nuns played several different roles, including those of secular males as well as male leadership figures from convent life. “At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Roman congregation in charge of governing the nun recommended nun “not to take off their habits, nor should they put on men’s hose, and those who play female roles are not to grow back their hair since nuns who have taken the veil must keep their hair cut off.” (Evangelisti) With these suggestions, it shows that there had been official recognition of the practices of the nuns at the time. Apparently it was not shunned, but given certain guidelines. The nuns used all of the resources that they had to make their productions as realistic as possible. They used their talents as seamstresses and otherwise to produce that which was necessary to stage their plays.

The institution of the Catholic Church and its practices allowed for the development of the theater within the convent. Certainly the importance of Catholic rituals cannot be overlooked in their influence on the drama of the convent theater. Many of these rituals not only provided for the spiritual contexts of the works, but also provide the physical space and atmosphere within the convent for the drama to take place. “The convent refectory – often mentioned as a place to accommodate the stage provided a suitable space for theatrical venue, as did the courtyard or the parlous. The latter in particular allowed nuns to perform their plays not only to the convent audience of novices, choir nuns and boarders, but also to outsiders. Here nuns could perform in the internal part of the parlous, whilst their visitors watched from the external part.” (Evangelisti) The spiritual environment and practices also included many rituals which were already very theatrical in nature, thus providing a great segue into the production of more secular plays. “The convent in general made natural space for the creation and enactment of theatrical material,

much as the Catholic Church did in the early history” (Vollendorf) Although it may not be the most apparent venue of theater, convent theater allowed for an expression that could not be seen perhaps in any other place.

“The convent provided a space for the development of a type of sub-culture or counter culture for women of seventeenth-century Spain, it was nonetheless a heterogeneous space that was still part of a larger patriarchal system” The convent provided a safe haven from secular society, but the expression through the theater allowed for personal commentary on the society within and without the walls of the convent. “Literacy among women may have been higher within convent walls than without, but visual images were part of the nuns’ daily life and undoubtedly would have had a major influence in the way they perceived themselves and their existence.” The theater empowered women within the convent; it allowed them to express themselves, in ways that otherwise may have been looked down upon. One example is Sor Marcela de San Felix, who brought with her many talents and abilities from the secular world to the convent. It was no coincidence that her father, Lope de Vega, was the theatrical genius of the time. The theater provided not only an environment for secular education, but for spiritual education as well. The context of the plays (fiestas and coloquios) brought to light certain spiritual themes that were almost intangible in other contexts. Perceived often as a prison, the closed environment of the convent provided the nuns an environment secluded from secular society where they could explore and develop talents, where they may have otherwise been left neglected. “Unlike written texts, plays were more accessible to women... theatre possessed an intrinsic visual dimension that made the meaning of words and actions immediately understandable to the convent audience.” (Evangelisti) Dedication to God through separation from the secular world led to the time that could be dedicated to writing plays. “Since the nuns

were to spend the greater part of any given day in solitude and silence, the many hours once spent in frivolous contact with people of society and each other could be spent in quiet contemplation, which in turn resulted in pages of material for manuscripts, including poetry, and plays.”

“It is important to remember that Sor Marcela’s audience, while obviously nuns by profession, were also women – human beings – subjected to the daily worries, doubts, stresses of suppressing and controlling thoughts, actions, and impulses.” (Mulroney) And it is in the recognition of such that we find the power of convent theater. Women were able to maintain their sacred nature while having a venue of expression that was not limited to the occurrences within the walls of the convent. They explored themes, and situations while remaining dedicated. The themes of “Muerte del Apetito” convey life within and outside of the convent. “Sor Marcela’s metaphors connote the religious doctrine within which the nuns lived, yet are expressed in a decidedly earthly, immediate context.” (Mulroney) The theater “may be ... a sincere attempt to instruct novices and provide them with an appropriate model of behavior.” But also perhaps more importantly it provided a great venue for education and expression. “Her plays presented characters symbolizing monastic discipline and the lessons nuns had to learn in order to live a life of spiritual perfection, material abnegation, and detachment from earthly matters and pleasures.” (Evangelisti) Although the majority of the plays commented on monastic life in a way which was to uplift and inspire, humor played a role in commentary and mild criticism of convent life. “The death of Apetito encourages them that they, like Alma, may conquer corporeal desires through spiritual perseverance.” (Mulroney)

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