Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico (review)

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Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico. By Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán. Translated by Sonya Lipsett-Rivera and Sergio Rivera Ayala. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999. Pp. xxii, 280. Tables. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. $55.00 cloth; $19.95 paper.

This is perhaps the most intellectually pithy account of Enlightenment culture in Latin America since John Tate Lanning's work on Guatemala's University of San Carlos. The Bourbon state and Enlightened elites strove to impose their new culture despotically, Viqueira Albán persuasively argues, and nowhere was this more evident than in campaigns to remove the marvelous, the wondrous, the magical from Mexico City's theater and boisterous streets in favor of a sober and skeptical bourgeois sangfroid. In the theater, the dramatic capsizings, the flashy special effects, the sensual dances, the audiences' rowdy commentaries all irked elite late eighteenth-century reformers, who sought to impose neo-classical "realism" and to represent the now scientific and "universal" verities of human nature. They failed miserably, and here Viqueira Albán is at his best, looking beyond the elite-generated edicts and codes to document the audiences who continued to cackle uproariously, the actors who drew attention to the play as a construct through their reliance on prompters, the unceasing audience penchant for the most outlandish fights of fancy and wild effects. What Enlightened despotism could not change, however, the market could, and elite theater was purged of the vulgar as the more scabrous popular entertainments moved to their own venues after Independence.

This widening chasm between elite and popular culture found further expression in Basque merchants' efforts to exclude the raucous plebe from the courts where they played *pelota*. Here Viqueira Albán suggests an intriguing argument: the battle over pelota revenues between a hospital and a group of friars concerned to help the dying die a proper religious death represented a larger process of secularization where physical health was increasingly trumping spiritual imperatives.

Viqueira Albán has cast the battle as one between elite and popular culture, and he proves especially adept at outlining the intellectual tenets of this new bourgeoisie. But these categories, perhaps, obscure as much as they reveal: such consensus on both sides of the divide! He suggests that ultimately this Enlightenment had French roots. Were there, then, no ascriptive elites who found baroque theatrics compelling? No declining aristocracy to thwart bourgeois aspirations? Michael Scardaville notes that the neighborhood police established by these "despotic" elites were often welcomed by the poor. Was modernity really, then, such an elite imposition on a recalcitrant population? These are minor quibbles. Indeed, I would argue, they merely underscore the book's intellectual meatiness, and thus its usefulness for inspiring raucous class discussions amongst even the often too-staid-and-sober undergraduate population.

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