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Laura Méndez de Cuenca: Mexican Feminist, 1835-1928

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***Laura Méndez de Cuenca: Mexican Feminist, 1835-1928.* Milada Bazant. University of Arizona Press, Tucson: 2018, 222 pages. Photographs, figures, appendix, and index are included. Paperback (\$32.00), Ebook (\$32.00)**

Reviewed by Stephanie Mitchell, Carthage College

Mary Kay Vaughan's new translation of the biography of Laura Méndez de Cuenca originally written by Milada Bazant, is a welcome contribution for those seeking a short, readable text that humanizes and feminizes Porfirian and early revolutionary Mexican history. It is especially helpful in offering an intimate portrait of the development of the federal education system under the leadership of Justo Sierra and José Vasconcelos. Méndez de Cuenca's career happened to coincide with these critical periods in education reform, and its illustrious trajectory allowed her both to view and shape the changes that modernized Mexican education.

From Vaughan's translation, we learn that Méndez de Cuenca was born into a relatively affluent, conservative family of French bakers during the early years of the Mexican Republic. Her first years of schooling were privileged, but they left her frustrated and bored with their overt emphasis on Catholic dogma and feminine handicrafts. When her family moved, allowing her to enter a school with a more rigorous pedagogy for girls, she found her passion and her calling. As a young adult, Méndez de Cuenca found herself surrounded by young Liberal literati: Enrique Olavarría y Ferrari, Justo Sierra, Guillermo Prieto, Manuel Acuña, and Agapito Silva. She fell in love with the poet Acuña and bore his child, scandalizing her parents, who disowned her, along with her similarly libertine sister. Later, Acuña also abandoned her as his son was being born, and then committed suicide. The infant died shortly after birth, devastating Méndez de Cuenca. That year marked the beginning of Méndez de Cuenca's adult life, which would continue to be marked by loss and long periods of penury. She married another poet from the same circle of friends, Agustín Cuenca, and went on to bear seven children, only two of whom survived infancy. (Of the two that reached adulthood, one, a son, died later at the age of twenty-two.) She struggled with depression, finding only a few happy years with Cuenca before he too died. Given her life experiences, perhaps this is why much of Méndez de Cuenca's celebrated poetry concerned the death of loved ones:

*...if there be pain like that felt by the mother
who searches for her absent child,
but absent, with an absence such as this!
If there be terrible pain, sharp, endless,
that turns existence into hell...
This then was what I felt! (53)*

After Cuenca's death, Méndez de Cuenca received some help from her sister and in-laws, but she had to rely mostly on her own labor to support herself and her remaining children. There were no normal schools in Mexico, so she prepared for a rigorous exam that entitled her to a teaching certificate. Her long career included publishing, writing, and research into pedagogical methods, but she returned to teaching repeatedly to maintain herself, finally retiring with a

teacher's pension when she was seventy-two. At times, her talents were recognized and rewarded, as when she worked as part-owner and editor of the successful *Revista Hispano-Americana* in San Francisco, or when Justo Sierra, in his capacity as Porfirian minister of education, sent her to St. Louis and later Berlin, Paris, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to research their pedagogical systems. At other points, however, she suffered setbacks, as when her co-owner/editor at the *Revista* cheated her and forced her out of the magazine, or when school directors gave her demeaning teaching assignments, such as "assistant" at a kindergarten, when her training had prepared her better for a professorship at the normal school.

Many people in Méndez de Cuenca's life affirmed that her personality was challenging. She could be inflexible, harsh, and judgmental. On one occasion, a sister left her two daughters in Méndez de Cuenca's care. She bathed them in cold water, forced them to rise at five in the morning, and fed them on carrots. When her sister returned, the children requested to never to be left with Méndez de Cuenca again. Often, however, complaints about her character appeared to be sexist. She was repeatedly accused of mannishness. One suspects that the same behaviors publishers and school authorities found offensive in a woman would have been acceptable or even laudable in a man. Méndez de Cuenca's dogged refusal to accept her culture's gender norms stands out as a continuous theme. It is possible this continuity emerged in the later telling of her own story or that it was the choice of the biographer to highlight it, yet the evidence of repeated transgressions of gendered expectations is strong.

Bazant entitles her biography "Mexican Feminist." She narrates a story of a woman who began to recognize the unfairness of the status of women, even as a young girl and who fought to challenge gendered restrictions of women throughout her life. Bazant includes one of Méndez de Cuenca's essays, "Ponderings on feminism" in an appendix. Méndez de Cuenca wrote extensively about issues relating to women, including a serialized novel, *El espejo de Amarylis*, and a book on housekeeping that was a foundational text in Mexican home economics. She had a long, domestic partnership with Aurora Gutiérrez, although Bazant sensibly refrains from classifying Méndez de Cuenca's sexuality.

Méndez de Cuenca along with her generation fought the early battles that made space for women in education and the professions, battles that would give way, following the revolution, to struggles for civil and political rights. Biography is an especially helpful genre for understanding this early stage of feminism because so much of that period was less about feminist organizing and more about individuals, friendships, writing, publishing, and personal stories.

In the Introduction of her book, Bazant's meditation on the art of writing biography, is profound. The many photographs that accompany the work come partly from archives, but also from the author's travels, where she has deliberately trod in the steps of her subject, photographing spaces in the present better to understand them in the past. Bazant aims to maintain a balance between intimacy with her subject and the distance required of the historian to achieve an impartial assessment. Nevertheless, her admiration for Méndez de Cuenca, pioneering poet, writer, educator, and feminist is both clear and contagious.