“You Can’t Dispose of Mercedes Lightly”: Mercedes de Acosta, Queer Women, and Queer Female Desire in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract
This thesis is based off of the life of Mercedes de Acosta (1893-1968), an out lesbian who was very active in the literary, theatrical, and screenwriting spheres at different points in her life. While many could consider her a “failed” artist, given that none of her works were financial successes, she is notable in this time period for the noted quality of her work, her many interpersonal relationships (romantic or otherwise) with others in her trade, and her artistic exploits on both sides of the Atlantic. Being “out” was incredibly unusual for LGBT+ identified people in this time period, and the homophobia of the period paired with the lack of financial success of her works may have contributed to the fact that she died in poverty. This thesis looks at the life and the historiography of Mercedes de Acosta in an attempt to reconstruct what a lesbian identity meant in this period for women and how her lesbian identity affected both de Acosta’s life and her relationships, as well as how she was remembered afterward.

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Although de Acosta’s writing is largely neglected, Schanke’s well-crafted, deeply-researched biography makes her live again, gliding down the streets of New York to show other women how it should be done.” — ForeWord. "[Schanke] has written a delightful biography of de Acosta, which places her in the Dona Juana hall of fame. . . . Schanke’s biography . . . is a delicious read, filled with juicy quotes and excellent research on peripheral players. Mercedes de Acosta had no such qualms and reincarnated Jehanne in the person of Eva le Gallienne in the 1925 production of Jehanne d’Arc. Robert Schake’s "That Furious Lesbian": The Story of Mercedes Acosta is a sustained effort to peel away the recurring labels that obliterate the magnificent other that was Mercedes.