



Acosta, Mercedes de (1893-1968)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Mercedes de Acosta was a poet, playwright, screenwriter, and costume designer, and she was a devotee of Eastern mysticism, the occult, and vegetarianism long before any of these pursuits became fashionable. But if she is remembered at all today, she is remembered for her love affairs with some of the most glamorous and visible women of her time.

Acosta was born in New York City on 1 March 1893, to a wealthy Spanish-Cuban émigré family. Her mother, a descendant of the Duke of Alba, raised her as a boy, calling her "Rafael" and dressing her in boy's attire. After the death of her father in 1907, however, Acosta's mother became concerned about her lack of femininity and dispatched her to a convent school in France, from which she was removed after an incident involving two nuns who were apparently lovers.

While in her early twenties, Acosta became involved in the lesbian theatrical circles of Broadway, particularly the salon of Bessie Marbury, a powerful producer and literary agent, and Marbury's lover Elsie de Wolfe, the prominent interior decorator. Among Acosta's early lovers were actresses Maude Adams, Alla Nazimova, and Katherine Cornell, as well as dancer Isadora Duncan.

In 1920, Acosta married the wealthy socialite and dilettante painter Abram Poole, whose proposal her mother, concerned with appearances, accepted before she could reject it. Acosta, ironically, spent her wedding night with her mother. Moreover, even as she married Poole, she was deeply involved in an affair with actress Eva Le Gallienne, for whom she wrote two plays, *Sandro Botticelli* (1923) and *Jehanne d'Arc* (1925). Neither play was a critical or commercial success, and the expensive failure of the latter play, combined with Acosta's controlling personality, led to a split between the two women.

Marbury recommended Acosta to the RKO film company as a writer, and in 1929, she moved to California, where, soon thereafter, she met Greta Garbo and almost immediately became her lover. The affair with Garbo was an intense and stormy one, and Acosta frequently found herself in rivalry for the aloof Garbo's affections, with men as well as women. Indeed, one of the more curious of these triangulations, one that lasted for over two decades, involved Acosta, Garbo, and photographer Cecil Beaton, who, though for the most part homosexual, was nonetheless obsessed with the enigmatic screen idol.

After a highly emotional split with Garbo in 1932, Acosta began an affair with Marlene Dietrich, which lasted, on and off, for the rest of the decade, although she continued to be Garbo's lover intermittently through those same years. Poole, from whom she had been separated for many years, sued for divorce in 1935.

World War II and the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s effectively brought this particular circle of Hollywood Sapphism to an end. Lesbian actresses either hid in ostensibly heterosexual marriages or faced blacklisting and the loss of their careers. Others, like Garbo, simply faded from the scene. Acosta immigrated to Paris, where she lived during the 1950s.



Mercedes de Acosta.
Photograph by Arnold
Genthe created in 1919
or 1920.
Library of Congress
Prints and Photographs
Division.

By 1960, Acosta had returned to New York, destitute and in poor health. To relieve her situation, she published her autobiography, *Here Lies the Heart*. While the book is often considered the great lesbian "kiss-and-tell" memoir, Acosta was careful to avoid directly specifying the sexual nature of her relationships with some of the most famous women of her day. Garbo nonetheless terminated all communication with Acosta as a result of its publication.

Although Acosta published three volumes of poetry in the early 1920s, had several plays staged, and wrote various film treatments, none of these brought her the success she sought, and it is through her memoirs--and her affairs--that she has achieved a level of lesbian immortality. She died, alone and virtually forgotten at seventy-five, in New York City.

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