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Books

● **David Barnett**

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Mercedes de Acosta: The poet who had affairs with the 20th century's most famous women

An unpublished book has emerged by the woman best known for her liaisons with Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Isadora Duncan



Mercedes de Acosta wrote the newly discovered volume for a set designer who staged many of Noël Coward's plays.

She was the “furious lesbian” who had affairs with some of the most famous women of the jazz age, prompting the writer and wit Alice B Toklas to remark of Mercedes de Acosta: “Say what you will about Mercedes, she’s had the most important women of the 20th century.”

Among the playwright and poet’s conquests and flirtations were Hollywood royalty Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, dancers Isadora Duncan and Tamara Karsavina, and reportedly Alice B. Toklas herself.

Although she never achieved the same heights of fame as the women she bedded – she staged a few plays and published three modestly received books of poetry in her lifetime: *Moods* in 1919, *Archways of Life* in 1921 and *Streets and Shadows* the following year – de Acosta is probably best known for her explosive memoir *Here Lies the Heart* in 1960, in which she detailed her liaisons in 1920s America, prompting rifts with several of the women named.

But now a fourth book of unpublished poetry has emerged, a one-off volume written by de Acosta for Gladys Calthrop, the British stage set designer who was responsible for the staging of many of Noël Coward’s plays.

The professionally bound book, presented in a quarter-morocco slipcase, contains 20 poems, only one of which is known to have been previously published. They are written to Calthrop with the dedication: “To Gladys, take these frail poems, for the sake of many things. Your eyes - these years - a dream, and some golden moments fleet with wings.”

The unique volume has come on to the market with a price tag of £8,750 from the London-based rare book dealers Peter Harrington with a provenance



Marlene Dietrich making her Hollywood film debut in 1930 in the film Morocco. Photograph: Eugene Robert Richee/Getty Images

almost as fascinating as de Acosta's life itself.

Sammy Jay, senior literature specialist at Peter Harrington, said: "Gladys Calthrop made her name as a longtime stage and costume designer of Noël Coward, who was a close friend and to whom she gave this book.

"It was previously owned by Coward's housekeeper, Maggie Moore. We acquired it from a lady who knew Noël Coward's housekeeper.

"The volume offers a unique and intimate window into one of the lesser-known celebrity affairs of someone who earned the nickname 'the greatest starfucker ever', and is all the more valuable for being a new discovery.

"Acosta is an impressive figure as a poet, as a Cubana, as an out lesbian, and more generally as a woman boldly making her way in the world, and I can see the book appealing to buyers coming at it from many angles. I wouldn't be at all surprised if it were quickly snapped up by some institutional library for all the above reasons."

In the poems, de Acosta writes to Calthrop, who died in 1980 aged 85: "You are a throb of a wound in beauty's side - like a dark hyacinth, wet with the passion of a troubled tide."

Jay says that the “dramatic, despairing and explicitly erotic” poems seem to have been written after their affair, and the contents suggest Calthrop ended it. He cites lines such as: “A lost cause maybe; - A song - a flower that you love - a tree, or for just some spark in you, that flaming up lit me.”

Mercedes de Acosta was born in March 1892 in New York to a Cuban father and Spanish mother. She attended the Convent of the Blessed Sacrament in Manhattan at the same time as the acerbic writer Dorothy Parker, and in 1920 she married the artist Abram Poole.



Greta Garbo in the 1930 film Anna Christie. Photograph: Mgm/Sportsphoto/Allstar

The marriage, which ended in 1935, seems to have been one of mere convenience for de Acosta, who spent the roaring 20s conducting a rapid-fire series of affairs, openly and proudly homosexual, leading the theatre historian Robert A Schanke to name his biography of her *That Furious*

Lesbian.

Her notoriety gave her material for her writing but didn't help her career prospects. Jay says: "She is largely remembered for her romantic liaisons and never achieved artistic distinction, likely because she refused to compromise herself or her work to fit standards of acceptability."

Her friend Ram Gopal, a dancer, remarked that "when she met men who ran the theatres, they did not want to work with a strong woman who loved women. Men found her too overpowering."

In 1927, the New York state legislature passed a bill banning performances with subjects of "sex degeneracy or sex perversion", but de Acosta persisted in writing and attempting to stage plays with themes of incest (*The Dark Light*, 1926) and prostitution (*Illusion*, 1928).

Isadora Duncan, the dancer, in about 1905. Photograph: ullstein bild Dtl./ullstein bild/Getty Images



De Acosta met Calthrop in 1927, when the latter seduced de Acosta's lover, the British-born Broadway star Eva Le Gallienne. In 1929, Calthrop worked on a London production of de Acosta's play *Prejudice*, and they began their own affair, de Acosta installing Calthrop in a house she owned in Beekman Place, on the East Side of Manhattan.

By 1960, when de Acosta published her memoir, her fortunes had shifted; she was broke and had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. The book caused de Acosta to be ostracized even further. Garbo ended her friendship with her, and Le Gallienne denounced the revelations about her in the book as lies.

Mercedes de Acosta died aged 76 on 9 May 1968, living in poverty in New York. Although she is remembered chiefly for the possibly apocryphal claim "I can get any woman away from any man", de Acosta was also a fierce activist against the Spanish civil war, a campaigner for women's rights (writing in her memoir: "I believed in every form of independence for women") and an animal rights campaigner, becoming vegetarian and refusing to wear furs.
