

Humor in Castellanos's *El eterno femenino*: The Fractured Female Image

Pamela J. McNab

Mexican author Rosario Castellanos constantly voices the concerns of women in her poetry, fiction and essays. Castellanos's final thoughts on this subject take shape in her only major play, aptly entitled *El eterno femenino*, which she completed shortly before her untimely death in 1974. Since then, scholars have been evaluating the significance of *El eterno femenino* in Castellanos's development as both an artist and a champion of women's rights. In fact, this play unites – and carries to the extreme – the many feminist concerns she previously examined in other genres. Barbara Bockus Aponte astutely observes that in *El eterno femenino* Castellanos “intenta reunir los múltiples aspectos de la estereotipación de la mujer que andaban dispersos [en sus otras obras].” *El eterno femenino*, then, is literally the final step in Castellanos's quest to find “another way to be.” Furthermore, this play occupies a pivotal point in the history of Spanish American women's literature. *El eterno femenino* grapples with the difficulties of its particular period, yet it is also “very much ahead of [its time] in the way that Castellanos problematize[s] gender.” Kirsten Nigro, in “Inventions and Transgressions: A Fractured Narrative on Feminist Theatre in Mexico,” identifies *El eterno femenino* as “a liminal text, a threshold between plays written by women about women's problems, mostly in a realistic manner, to ‘show how things are,’ to ones that dissect and deconstruct the institutions and social practices that ‘make these things the way they are’”(138). Nigro and Amalia Gladhart concur that *El eterno femenino* introduces controversial gender issues later addressed by other dramatists such as Carmen Boullosa and Sabina Berman. Thus, *El eterno femenino* offers us not only greater insight into Castellanos as an

individual author, but also serves as a bridge from the past into the future of literary production by Hispanic women.

The humor Castellanos constantly and carefully cultivates sets *El eterno femenino* apart from most Spanish American literature. Dispensing with formality, Castellanos chooses to manipulate several comedic strategies; farce, caricature, irony and satire abound in each act. Castellanos herself has proposed:

una campaña: no arremeter contra las costumbres con la espada flamígera de la indignación ni con el trémolo lamentable del llanto sino poner en evidencia lo que tienen de ridículas, de obsoletas, de cursis y de imbéciles. Les aseguro que tenemos un material inagotable para la risa. ¡Y necesitamos tanto reír porque la risa es la forma más inmediata de la liberación de lo que nos aprisiona!

Clearly, Castellanos considered humor a potent weapon with which to critique society. However, this didactic opportunity is almost lost in *El eterno femenino* because of the play's exhaustiveness: Castellanos seems to expose every flaw in our gender relationships, almost as though she knew this would be her last chance to do so. Unfortunately, this labyrinthine drama defies attempts to stage it practically and so challenges any attempt to examine it systematically. Thus, even though readers have discussed topics such as the uses of satire and irony in *El eterno femenino*, many avenues for further study remain open.

Throughout the play's multiple scenarios, the protagonist Lupita adopts several roles wherein her interior and exterior lives clash. In this way, Lupita's character seems particularly indebted to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who appears as a disgruntled historical character in act two. As we know, Sor Juana rejected conventional domesticity in favor of a life of scholarship. In her eloquent missive, "Respuesta a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz," Sor Juana identifies a perplexing dichotomy: the dilemma of brains versus beauty. In a well-known passage she recounts her childhood methods of self-education:

en las mujeres . . . es tan apreciable el adorno natural del cabello, yo me cortaba de él cuatro o seis dedos, midiendo hasta donde llegaba antes, e imponiéndome ley de que si cuando volviese a crecer hasta allí no sabía tal o cual cosa . . . me lo había de volver a cortar, en pena de la rudeza . . . no me parecía razón que estuviese vestida de cabellos cabeza que estaba tan desnuda de noticias, que era más apetecible adorno.

Sor Juana purposely used her hair to symbolize the primacy of intelligence over beauty. However, this issue which Sor Juana resolved so logically for herself, persists today, negatively affecting many women's lives and sense of self. Although the "Respuesta" shares many other similarities with *El eterno femenino*, including its extraordinary use of irony, this conflict between the physical image presented to the world and one's interior development or intelligence permeates *El eterno femenino*.

Another level of implicit comparison further complicates this interior/exterior dichotomy. The woman's view of herself may differ from society's perspective of her. A third angle emerges when society then judges her by comparing her perceived appearance to a certain standard or ideal. Thus, the image of the woman becomes further fragmented. Martha Lafollette Miller has written that the humor in Castellanos's poetry "is often based on ruptured expectations and on . . . incongruity." To use Lafollette Miller's term, incongruity is largely responsible for creating the verbal and situational irony that characterizes much of *El eterno femenino*. Castellanos deftly defines her characters with this technique: by taking advantage of the audience or the reader's preconceived notions and then quickly overturning them, she dramatically exposes and then ridicules our misconceptions. Our study will further examine this technique with regard to the fragmentation of the female characters. We will consider in detail the disparities among these three perspectives of the female characters: a woman's self-image or interior view, her exterior self or the way others perceive her, and the ideal image presented for emulation by society.

The beauty salon setting of *El eterno femenino* is the ideal location for a modern glimpse of the woman divided, since "El espacio escénico de un salón de belleza tiene significado con respecto al papel que se asigna a la mujer en la sociedad – el de adornar y agradar." Castellanos's contempt for the emphasis placed on appearances is immediately apparent in her stage directions for act one: "Hay que acentuar el aspecto marciano de las clientes metidas dentro de los secadores." Castellanos juxtaposes this attack on beauty with society's fear of the thinking woman. From the beginning, the play exploits the assumption that intellect and beauty occupy two mutually exclusive poles of female experience. The protagonist, Lupita, who has come to have her hair styled for her wedding, is unwittingly subjected to programmed dreams while she sits under the hair dryer. The salesman who attaches the dream-gadget to the dryers explains their purpose: "cuando se descubrió que el aburrimiento o el sueño eran sólo transitorios y que podían tener otras

consecuencias . . . entonces . . . entonces fue necesario inventar algo para conjurar el peligro (de) que las mujeres, sin darse cuenta, se pusieran a pensar . . . El pensamiento es, en sí mismo, un mal. Hay que evitarlo” (28). Thus, the male-dominated society that desires pretty, superficial women conspires to manipulate women’s dreams in order to reinforce and maintain the status quo. None of the dreams features women as independently functioning members of society; instead, they are limited to predictable scenarios, such as the good wife who envisions “que a su marido le suben el sueldo,” (29) or the ideal mother, who fantasizes “que sus hijos sacan diez de promedio en la escuela; que sus hijas necesitan brassiere,” (29-30) again underscoring intelligence as a male domain and beauty as the woman’s. Moreover, the dream device implicates women in their own subjugation. Since women’s quest for beauty is often motivated by their desire to please men, the beauticians who uphold the unrealistic standards of beauty already participate in the inescapable cycle. With this device, beauticians become even more compromised agents of the status quo by subconsciously perpetuating images that keep women trapped in “el eterno femenino.” To recapitulate, then, the conflict between knowledge and appearance, between the interior and the exterior selves, discovered by Sor Juana in the innocence of childhood, is at the crux of much of the humor in *El eterno femenino*.

Due to the device attached to the hair dryer, each of the three acts examines different aspects of Lupita’s subconscious. In act one, which we will examine in detail later, Lupita’s dream spans a woman’s life from her honeymoon through old age. In act two, Lupita’s dream unfolds in a wax museum that is part of a circus where various historical women come to life to show how the stories normally associated with each of them have obscured the truth. For example, the Biblical Eve laments, “Desde hace siglos he soñado con alguien a quien contarle la verdadera historia de la pérdida del Paraíso, no esa versión para retrasados mentales que ha usurpado a la verdad” (74). In this way, act two reverses the situation found in act one. The first act prompted us to laugh at the inconsistencies between the “real” Lupita and the image she projects outwardly. Now, in the second act, we are asked to laugh at our own erroneous notions of history, which stray significantly from the truth (or so Castellanos would have us believe.) Finally, in act three Lupita’s hair is so ruined that she tries on various wigs, each of which allows her to experience vicariously the corresponding lifestyle of the wig chosen.

Comprised of three separate sections, act three is arguably the least cohesive of the play, but one that nevertheless continues to exploit the rupture

between women's interior and exterior perspectives. The first section dramatizes three possible alternatives to traditional domesticity: the single woman, the prostitute, and the "other woman." The conflict between inner truth and exterior appearance marks all of these roles, but especially the life of Lupita, the neophyte prostitute. When she explains to her more experienced colleague how she purposely chose this profession, the older woman quickly advises her to invent another story for her clients: "lo que le gusta es pensar que te está chingando. Que eres una infeliz, tan infeliz que ni siquiera te das cuenta de si él es muy macho o no. Tan desdichada que, aunque sea un desdichado cabrón, seas tú la que provoque lástima, no él. ¿Y quién va a creer en tu desgracia si no caíste contra tu voluntad?" (155) In order to succeed, Lupita must restrain herself, must masquerade as someone she is not, to create the illusion desired by her clients. In the second section of act three, Lupita, as a reporter, interviews a series of successful women. Although the women are publicly recognized for their professional accomplishments, individually each discusses domestic concerns, like the concert pianist's overwhelming desire to become a mother. Ironically, Lupita, who is obviously a professional woman, downplays each woman's career achievements and instead exposes their domestic shortcomings. In the final section of this act, Castellanos takes a metatheatrical poke at herself by transforming Lupita into a teacher who is leading a women's discussion group about *El eterno femenino*. It is the only part of the play where Castellanos seems to deal with women's problems directly, rather than through the filter of humor.

By the end of the play, Lupita, the bride-to-be, has been ironically transformed, both inside and out. She innocently came to the salon to have her appearance, her exterior self, beautified. However, her experience there has not only ruined her looks, but has also stripped her of whatever fantasies she might have entertained about married life. Just as Sor Juana believed that an "empty head" was not worthy of adornment, so Lupita has been robbed of her hair, while having her head filled with instructions about her role as a woman in Mexican society. Horrified, Lupita flees the salon.

A close examination of act one reveals how Castellanos creates and utilizes the disjunctions among the various images of Lupita for humorous, and sometimes didactic, intent. The five scenes of act one chronicle the life of the middle class Mexican woman, from her wedding night until her widowhood, as played out in Lupita's first set of dreams. In each scene, Lupita's self-perception differs drastically from the way others see her. However, her character is not static, as one might suspect. Initially, Lupita

seems vibrant and witty, a woman who relishes her sexuality, but she gradually submits to expectations imposed by others. We thus witness Lupita's transformation from a state of non-conformist self-awareness to one of reluctant compliance with the norms. The process of her acquiescence is accompanied by a radical denial of self that extends into her twilight years, when her belated recovery of her self-image reveals a deeply bitter woman.

"Luna de miel" focuses on the transition between adolescence and adulthood: the marriage day. The custom of showing blood as evidence of the new wife's loss of virginity becomes the vehicle for criticizing this ideal. Lupita's excessive care to make sure the red stain is visible first suggests that perhaps she is different inside from the image she attempts to present to her new husband, Juan. Shooting questions at her in an Inquisitorial style, Juan demands to know, "¿Ha sido ésta la primera vez?" (34). In an aside to the audience Lupita complains "¿Qué manía tienen todos los hombres de preguntar lo mismo!" (34); this undercuts the apparent innocence of her response to Juan: "No sé de qué me estás hablando" (34). This scene becomes even funnier when the audience realizes that we have misinterpreted the question along with Lupita: Juan was trying to determine if this were Lupita's first wedding, not her first sexual encounter. Juan's next question, "¿Y has llegado pura al matrimonio?" (34) is met by a similar tactic of verbal evasion. Rather than answer him directly, Lupita instead offers the proof of her bloody dress. When Juan comments that it looks like ketchup, Lupita, enraged, explains, "Es plasma. De la mejor calidad" (34). With this remark, Lupita indirectly admits that she has violated the accepted code of conduct, but that she has tried to create the appropriate image nevertheless. Juan's reply, "Muy bien contestado" (34), implies that the male society which insists upon women's purity is hypocritically willing to look the other way, provided the proper image is maintained. Juan now poses the big question: "¿Te gustó?" (35) Once again, Lupita's first response is evasive:

LUPITA (*Indignada.*) ¿Gustarme? ¿A mí? ¿A una muchacha decente? ¿Por quién me tomas?

JUAN (*Esperanzado.*) ¿No te gustó?

LUPITA (*Firme.*) Me pareció repugnante, asqueroso.

JUAN (*Transportado.*) Gracias, Lupita. Ya sabía yo que no ibas a fallarme a la hora de la verdad. Gracias, gracias. (35)

Although now legally married, Lupita is not allowed to enjoy her sexuality. Aware of this, she adopts the expected response of the "muchacha decente."

For Juan, Lupita's pleasure is not at issue; once again, his concern is that she conform to societal expectations.

Until this point, Juan is presented as a ridiculous character, somewhat absurd and naive. His formal interrogation of Lupita is undercut by the fact that he is nude except for a few trappings of formal wear, such as "el sombrero de copa" (32) and "los calcetines altos y zapatos de charol" (33). However, as this scene progresses we witness his transformation into a stereotypical macho. For example, at first, when Lupita obeys him, he is "horrorizado," (33) perhaps by his power over her or at her willingness to obey – her compliance is not what he expected. Then, when he asks Lupita about her first time and she feigns ignorance, he seems uncertain of what he even meant by the question, as the stage directions indicate: "(Tomado de sorpresa. Evidentemente no era la respuesta que esperaba. Improvisa)" (34). Later, when Lupita shows him the blood, Juan replies, "Sí, veo, pero no soy muy experto. Parece salsa Catsup" (34). Like Lupita, Juan knows what society expects from him, yet unlike her, he is unsure of himself. However, after Lupita verbally affirms her adherence to the standards, Juan dramatically assumes the macho pose. When Lupita vows that she will never let Juan touch her again, he asserts his authority: "Tengo la fuerza y tengo el derecho" (35). Their disagreement over further sexual contact escalates until Juan states coldly: "No, no me apiadaré de ti aunque me lo supliques hincándote a mis pies . . . ¿Qué crees que un macho mexicano se va a dejar conmovido por unas lágrimas de cocodrilo? No" (36). The phrase "lágrimas de cocodrilo" is significant: Juan's assumption of his role as a domineering, hard-hearted macho has been at least partially motivated by Lupita's faked acceptance of society's norms. There is a double standard at work here: the woman's purity (or appearance thereof) is of paramount importance, but conversely she is expected to satisfy her husband's sexual desires without question. Castellanos thus suggests that women are forever trapped by this dilemma.

In the next scene, "La anunciación," Lupita has just learned that she is pregnant. The stage directions describe Lupita as "guapísima y exultante de dicha" (36) and she herself claims, "Soy muy feliz" (38); her inner happiness and her outward beauty reflect each other. However, Lupita's condition contradicts Mamá's notions of what pregnancy should be like. Gradually, Mamá will render her miserable and ugly, thus eradicating both her natural beauty and joy. First, Mamá, as societal watchdog, criticizes her demeanor: "Una señora decente no tiene ningún motivo para ser feliz . . . y si lo tiene, lo disimula. Hay que tener en cuenta que su inocencia ha sido mancillada, su

pudor violado. Ave de sacrificio, ella acaba de inmolarsse para satisfacer los brutales apetitos de la bestia” (38-9). Mamá’s, and hence society’s, message is that the woman should not acknowledge her sexuality in terms other than martyrdom to her husband’s animalistic urges. Thus, woman becomes her own enemy in the struggle for a satisfying marriage. Next, Mamá attempts to adjust Lupita’s physical well-being. She insists that Lupita must feel awful: “te lo estoy viendo en la cara: tienes náusea, una náusea horrible, ¿verdad?” (40) Since Lupita twice responds that she feels fine, her mother forces her to drink warm salt water, which immediately achieves the desired effect. Lupita returns from the bathroom “cadavérica” (41) and now claims that she feels awful, “Como un perro” (41). As Lupita slowly acquires the “correct” image of the pregnant woman, Mamá delivers the crowning blow: “La toma, la despeina, le quita el maquillaje, la deja hecha un desastre” (41). Thus, in both “Luna de miel” and “La anunciación,” women perpetuate female misery by adhering to the stereotypes. The newlywed Lupita’s hypocrisy incites Juan’s clichéd macho response, but in “La anunciación” it is Lupita’s mother who ensures that her daughter will endure the same agony as she did earlier. Mamá is unrelenting until she has forced Lupita to conform, both in body and spirit, to the expected norms. As the agents of tradition, Juan and Mamá manipulate Lupita, ignoring her feelings and opinions and forcing compliance with what society demands in each situation.

After these two scenes, Lupita continues to lose touch with her inner self. She begins to envision herself as the ideal mother and wife, although we see that she is actually far from perfect. Once again, the discrepancy between Lupita’s image of herself and the way others see her creates a great deal of humor. In “La cruda realidad,” Lupita encourages her children’s squabbling while she lounges, reading aloud from a woman’s magazine, “La educación de los hijos es un asunto muy delicado que no puede dejarse en manos de cualquiera” (47). The contrast between Lupita’s behavior and the magazine’s advice is quite funny. The irony becomes even sharper when Lupita fails to recognize that this message applies to her. She laments, “¡Dios me libre de la nana que los malcría o del kinder que los vuelve desamorados! La que tiene que sacrificarse es la madre” (47). From our point of view, there is no evidence that Lupita is a self-sacrificing mother, but rather the opposite: inattentive and self-indulgent.

Lupita also fancies herself the ideal wife. She boasts, “Y en cuanto a mi persona, no he descuidado jamás de mi apariencia. ¿Qué retiene al marido sino una mujer siempre esbelta, lucidora? Por eso es que mi pobre Juan está

cada día más enamorado de mí” (48). This self-assessment is contradicted by Lupita’s actual appearance: “Tubos en la cabeza, cara embarrada de crema rejuvenecedora, bata que conoció mejores días” (46). The disparity between Lupita’s self-image, her outward appearance, and the ideal is quite striking. She believes that she epitomizes the ideal, but the audience, aware of the incongruities, laughs at this version of Lupita, who is fooling herself. At this point, the audience learns that Juan is having an affair with his secretary. As we gradually sense Lupita’s awareness of Juan’s infidelity, the audience tends to sympathize with her, until she fatally shoots him and his lover. Previously, we found Lupita’s self-assessment to be laughable, but her acts of revenge create a tragic outcome that somehow seems disproportionate. Her character has crossed over from the ridiculous to the pathetic, a transition that deflates the humor in this scene. Unable to laugh with or laugh at a character we either pity or do not understand, the audience is not sure how to respond to this Lupita. Perhaps this confusion is part of Castellanos’s message: a woman can simultaneously determine her own fate and yet also become a victim of it.

In “Crepusculario,” a mature Lupita now defends the very ideals she earlier challenged, in essence assuming her mother’s role from “La anunciación.” Throughout this scene Lupita argues with her own daughter, who is more interested in college than marriage. Attempting to ensure that her daughter will experience the same hardships and limitations that she did, Lupita insists, “no vas a ser distinta de lo que fui yo. Como yo no fui distinta de mi madre. Ni mi madre distinta de la abuela” (61). As her name suggests, Lupita II will be forced to take her place in the cycle of the eternal feminine. Lupita II, like her mother before her, envisions herself as different from the models society dictates, but social pressure forces her to conform.

In the final scene of act one, “Apoteosis,” Lupita has once more become aware of who she is, although the image she wants to project to her dead husband is quite different from reality. Unlike the Lupita of “Luna de miel,” this Lupita is not trying to deceive Juan by pretending to reflect the norm; on the contrary, her comments spring from the resentment of having sacrificed her life to her roles as wife and mother. Her remarks reveal the disappointment and solitude she experienced as a wife. Sarcastically proclaiming her merry widowhood, Lupita gloats, “Y nadie me deja ya vestida y alborotada para ir al cine porque hubo una junta de negocios. Y nadie se olvida de mi cumpleaños, ni del aniversario de bodas” (64). Lupita also characterizes motherhood as more chore than glory. Still hypothetically

addressing Juan's grave, she adds, "en cuanto a los hijos, cumplí con mi deber de colocarlos . . . ¡Ay, por fin, me los quité de encima!" (64) This complaint contrasts sharply with the earlier observation that "¡No hay nada comparable al amor maternal!" (62) Now, Lupita is sadly aware that the eternal feminine is a scam. Her failure to achieve the ideals, especially in her roles as wife and mother, leaves her with nothing at the end of her life. This return to consciousness, her realization of the disparities between the life she has lead and the expectations society had of her, closes this act on a grim, sobering note, devoid of the humor seen earlier.

This close analysis of act one reveals that the splintered image of Lupita is a constant throughout the changing scenarios. Castellanos continually juxtaposes three clashing perspectives of Lupita – the interior woman, the exterior woman, and the ideal – in an attempt to entertain and educate her audience. In some situations, we laugh at the ridiculous incongruities while in other scenes the disparities among the three perspectives become almost tragic. Castellanos addresses this issue directly in act three during the ladies' consideration of *El eterno femenino*. Here, the women frantically discuss the same issues raised elsewhere in the play, such as the quest for beauty and the need to be perfect wives and mothers. They discover that woman's conflict is borne of her inability to reconcile these multiple versions of herself with what society demands. The group laments over ever resolving these incongruities, especially for women of Third World countries, when Señora 4 proposes:

La tercera vía tiene que llegar hasta el fondo último del problema. No basta adaptarnos a una sociedad que cambia en la superficie y permanece idéntica en la raíz. No basta imitar los modelos que se nos proponen y que son la respuesta a otras circunstancias que las nuestras. No basta siquiera descubrir lo que somos. Hay que inventarnos. (194)

Castellanos thus reaches the heart of the problem: changing an appearance without changing the attitudes that determine that appearance will not suffice, either for individuals, like Lupita, or for society. In this way, the many unharmonious perspectives of Lupita in act one reflect one of Castellanos's primary messages.

When Castellanos creates and maintains comic tension as a result of disparities among the various versions of Lupita, she reaches a level of humor rarely found in contemporary Spanish American literature. Surely, one of her many talents is her ability to explore comedy as a means of promoting a new

social awareness. Although she is perhaps a bit over-ambitious, we can admire and appreciate the new approach to feminist concerns Rosario Castellanos was developing when she wrote *El eterno femenino*. It is our continued loss that her life was prematurely shortened by a disastrous accident at a time when she still had so much more to say.

Albion College

1. Barbara Bockus Aponte discusses Castellanos's early dramatic works in footnote three of her article, "Estrategias dramáticas del feminismo en *El eterno femenino* de Rosario Castellanos," *Latin American Theatre Review* 20.2 (1987): 57. In spite of having some experience with the genre, Castellanos was reluctant to undertake writing *El eterno femenino*. As Raúl Ortiz notes in his foreword to the play, when actress Emma Teresa Armendáriz and her husband, director Rafael López Miarnau, approached her about "una posible obra teatral que planteara los problemas de ser mujer en un mundo condicionado por varones," at first Castellanos declined, considering herself incapable of successfully completing such a project.

2. For many years, the only study specifically concerning *El eterno femenino* was Kirsten Nigro's article "Rosario Castellanos' Debunking of *The Eternal Feminine*." Interest in the play has gradually increased from the late 1980's until the present. Other works of general interest include those listed in the "Works Consulted" by the following authors: Barbara Bockus Aponte, Sandra Messinger Cypess, Amalia Gladhart, Carl Good, Linda Kintz, Mónica Szurmuk and María de Velasco.

3. Bockus Aponte 50.

4. Nigro, "Inventions and Transgressions," 140.

5. See the aforementioned articles by Nigro ("Inventions and Transgressions") and Gladhart.

6. Castellanos's fondness for humor predates *El eterno femenino*. See Martha Lafollette Miller.

7. Rosario Castellanos, "La participación de la mujer mexicana en la educación formal," *Mujer que sabe latín* (México: SepSetentas, 1973): 39.

8. The drama's structure is overly complex, comprised of 20 episodes plus brief scenes that link the episodes. Nigro discusses these issues more completely in "Debunking," 98-100.

9. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 123.

10. Lafollette Miller, 63.

11. Bockus Aponte, 51.

12. Rosario Castellanos. *El eterno femenino* (México: Fondo de Cultura, 1975): 23. All further quotations refer to this edition and will be noted in the text.

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