

Elena Garro's/Lope de Vega's *La dama boba*: Seventeenth-Century Inspiration for a Twentieth-Century Dramatist

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In the introduction to the 1967 edition of her play *El árbol* Elena Garro wrote:

Mi primer contacto con el teatro fue en la infancia y a través de las lecturas de los clásicos españoles. *La dama boba*, *La estrella de Sevilla*, *Las paredes oyen*, *El perro del hortelano*, *El condenado por desconfiado*, etc. me iniciaron en el deslumbrante mundo de la fantasía española del cual todavía no acabo de salir. (n.p.)

It is therefore no great surprise that she has chosen the title of one of Lope de Vega's plays for her own play: *La dama boba*. That inspiration goes beyond the title, and beyond even the inclusion of a major portion of two different scenes. This study will compare the two works to discover and outline the ideas shared and the form these ideas take. It begins with a consideration of the salient features of Lope's play and then takes up those areas of correspondence and contrast between the plays: theme, characters, language, dramatic recourses. We discover that Garro turns for inspiration to a Golden Age theatrical tradition said to serve the purpose of affirming societal unity and creates a play with a very different object: the illustration of the enormous chasm which still exists between the European and the indigenous culture in Mexico. The well-known historian of world religions and mythologies Mircea Eliade's *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* provides a commentary on these different mentalities brought into contact with the Conquest of Mexico.

Lope's play is about Finea, "la dama boba." Her father, Otavio, has two daughters: Finea, beautiful and simple, and Nise, who is beautiful and intellectual. In discussing their suitability as wives, he tells his friend that he would prefer the *boba*, giving this commentary on the role of woman: "Está la discreción de una casada/en amar y servir a su marido;/en vivir recogida y recatada,/honesta en el hablar y en el vestido;/ . . . en retirar la vista y el

oído," (Ed. Schevill, *La dama boba* 225-230). Because of her cleverness and arrogance, he finds Nise less appropriate. He has arranged a match for Finea, who has a large dowry left her by her uncle. But when the chosen one, Liseo, hears her verbal simpleness, he has serious doubts and begins to court Nise. Nise is promised to Laurencio, who decides that Finea's money suits him better. Laurencio therefore begins to court Finea, suggesting love as a teacher: "es luz del entendimiento/amor" (830-1). She goes through a process of development from her early state of simpleness, acquiring a consciousness of self and purpose, and becomes finally the prime mover of the action, demonstrating herself to be the opposite of "recogida y recatada." This development is conveyed in her speech. From the beginning she demonstrates her linguistic lack of polish as well as her simpleness of thought. When Liseo poetically answers Otavio's question of how his trip was: "con los deseos enoja;/que siempre le hacen más largo" (936-7), she interjects "Ese macho de la noria/pudierais haber pedido,/que anda como una persona" (936-940). Another example of her lack of understanding beyond the literal surfaces after Nise quarrels with her regarding Laurencio's attention: "Si los ojos puso en ti,/quítelos luego . . ." (1700-1). Finea passes the message on to Laurencio in a very literal sense:

Pues tú me has de quitar luego
los ojos que me pusiste.

...

Que me los quites, te ruego,
con ese lienzo, de aquí,
si yo los tengo en mis ojos

...

Pues limpia y quita los tuyos,
que no han de estar en los míos.

...

Ponlos a Nise en los suyos.

This penchant for interpreting words literally or concretely includes "pasar" (to think about): ". . . que no has de pasarme a mí/por el pensamiento más;/por eso allá te desvía,/ y no me pases por él" (1726-29). This inclination passes quickly to the subtleties of appearance as opposed to reality and its purposeful manipulation as in the following exchange when her father has scolded her for allowing Laurencio to embrace her. She tells Laurencio that he must undo the act:

Finea:	También me le has de quitar, no ha de rendirme por esto.
Laurencio:	¿Cómo ha de ser?
Finea:	Siendo presto ¿No sabrás desabrazar?

- Laurencio: El brazo alcé--tienes razón, ya me acuerdo--agora alzaré el izquierdo, y el abrazo desharé. (Abrázala)
- Finea: Estoy ya desabrazada/Pues no lo ves? (1756-65)

The end result is a second embrace. She literally repeats the act forbidden by her father while ostensibly following his orders. At this point we do not know if it is her simpleness or incipient understanding of how to manipulate language to her own end.

At the beginning of Act III she very eloquently tells about the effects worked on her by love's instruction with a very polished and poetic speech demonstrating her transformation. By the end of the act her father, who has been so concerned with appearances that he has not noted earlier the change in her, asks "¿No eres simple?" She answers "Cuando quiero" (2796). She has passed from her early state of concreteness, literalness, simpleness, to a metatheatrical state of consciousness of self and empowerment through which she is able to manipulate language and, consequently, reality. She thus illustrates her new-found ability and willingness to alter reality to her advantage. On another occasion she tells her father that Laurencio has gone to Toledo, having previously given the name "Toledo" to the attic where she is hiding him. When Otavio tells her to stay out of sight she chooses the attic, pointing out to her father "y advierte que lo has mandado"(2867), thereby cleverly arranging to be with her lover and laying the responsibility on her father. Using this manipulative ability, Fenisa brings the play to the common epithalamic ending typical of Golden Age comedies. In the seventeenth century these last-minute pairings served to reaffirm societal unity. The ironic twist at the end of Garro's play reverses the pairing and denies societal unity. We shall also observe that Garro employs metatheatrical techniques, verbal wordplays, and the interplay of illusion and reality, all elements present in Lope's play. Since these pairings served to reaffirm societal unity, the conclusion has all the ladies paired off, with Laurencio and Finea together. We shall observe this same metatheatrical quality in Garro's play as well as the verbal wordplays and the interplay of illusion/reality.

In the beginning of Garro's play, we, the audience, watch a rural Mexican audience in the town of Coapa attending a production of Lope's *La dama boba* put on by Teatro del Pueblo, a traveling theater company (similar to one Garro worked with) sent from Mexico City to "bring culture to the provinces" (Muncy, "The Author Speaks" . . .). The opening scene is Finea's reading lesson, Act I, scene v. At the end of the scene, the character Rufino, the *maestro*, whose real name is Francisco, goes offstage. Scene vi continues until it is discovered that Francisco has disappeared, thus halting the production, since he was to double as Laurencio, Finea's love instructor, in scene vii. In the audience had been Avelino, the mayor of another rural town, Tepán. He had written twenty-two unanswered letters to authorities in Mexico City requesting a teacher. He had despaired of getting one. He now

finds a ready solution at hand. He kidnaps Francisco, who is obviously a teacher, since as Rufino he was teaching Finea to read on the stage. The action of Act I takes place in Coapa and concerns this kidnapping of Francisco and, after his disappearance, the introduction of many Mexican cultural motifs. The inhabitants of Coapa whom we meet are Don Salvador, the mayor, three blond men called *los tres jilotes*, three young ears of corn, who are cast as the local "fates," and *el público*, the audience for the performance who comment singly as *voz del público* and severally as *voces del público*.

The scene shifts to Tepán for Act II. The cast of Tepán consists of the mayor, Avelino, his friend Antonio, the mayor's daughter Lupe, and, again, *voz del público*. Act II concerns Francisco's desire to leave Tepán and Avelino's insistence on his teaching the townspeople to read while attired in seventeenth-century dress. In the middle of Act II Avelino produces a recreation of the stage set of Lope's *La dama boba* in the town square with period costumes for the townspeople. The love interest between Francisco and Lupe develops in Act III, but when the traveling theatrical troupe arrives Francisco departs with them, leaving a sad town, as Avelino plans to write yet another letter requesting a teacher.

In Garro's play we find Lope's same word manipulation, as well as an explanation for the apparent divergences in meaning: these are two cultures meeting here and each brings different elements. The European culture brought by Francisco brings the intellectual aspect while the indigenous culture brings the keen perception of the natural world. Lupe says: "Aquí en Tepán, cuando decimos las palabras, las nombramos y Ud. nada más las dice" (Garro, *La dama boba* 216). This is followed by an extended wordplay involving "saber"/"conocer"/"desconocer," reminiscent of the "abrazar/desabrazar" wordplay of Lope's drama. The series of word oppositions finally leads to a significant cultural difference. Lupe says

¡Huy! Primero vamos a aprender a leer, que él a conocer lo que va del día a la noche, de la semilla a la mata, del agua presa al agua libre, y del animal a la mujer. . . .

Antonio adds:

Y a mirar, en vez de poner los ojos.

Voz del público:

Y yo aprenderé a hacer túneles como los que hacen las hormigas!
¡Ujujuj! (219)

Thus while the townspeople will learn the intellectual skill of reading, Francisco will gain insight from the local culture into the true nature of things. Later we will observe that in assessing the two cultures Garro's text comes down firmly on the side of the indigenous one. The issue of reality/appearance reminiscent of Lope's play is also prominent in Garro's work. When Francisco learns that he is to teach the townspeople of Tepán to read, he tries to explain that he is an actor, not a teacher. Don Avelino insists "Qué no lo vi, con mis propios ojos, tripado en su escuelita . . ." (200). Just as Finea's father was interested in appearances so is don Avelino. At the end of the play there is another of the many examples illustrating this interest as Avelino complains that Francisco deceived him:

Avelino: (A Lupe) ¡Me engañó!
 Lupe: ¡No, no te engañó! Te enseñó a leer.
 Avelino: Me engañó, porque no era maestro.
 Lupe: Sabía lo que sabe un maestro: las letras. (243-4)

(What constitutes reality? Appearance, figurative meaning or substance, literal meaning? Does a teacher need to know something other than "letras"?)

Avelino: Pero me engañó, no era maestro.
 Lupe: ¡Ya lo sabías!
 Avelino: ¡Seguro que lo sabía! ¿Crees que soy tan ignorante? Pero, me engañó, no era maestro. (244)

It does not matter to Avelino that his object is accomplished, that the townspeople have learned to read. What matters is that the "appearance" is not maintained. He echoes Otavio's concern for appearance in Lope's play. Francisco wishes the opposite as he is urged to leave by his companions. He desperately tries to turn appearance into reality, to regain his identity again as "maestro" in order to stay with Lupe: "¡Lupe! . . . ¿Cómo dices ninguno? ¡Soy yo, Francisco Aguilar, el maestro de Tepán!" (244)

Women are presented as a separate group from men with disparaging comments similar to those of Otavio in Lope's play. In Act I the director Juan says, "Qué latosa son las mujeres . . ." and in Act II Antonio comments to Lupe's father, "Ya consuélate! Te tocó niña para dolor de tu corazón y vergüenza de tu familia"(211). There is continued commentary on the role of woman and criticism throughout this act. However, the women are also presented as having powers beyond those of men, as when Avelino says:

El don de la mujer: de ver cosas en donde no hay nada. Esa es la verdadera mujer. Uno, como hombre, ahí va, y ve el camino de su casa y el de su trabajo. En cambio la mujer no va a ninguna parte

y ve detrás de los caminos, y detrás de los ojos del hombre. (205-6)

Thus despite the words in both plays "putting women in her place," the dominant force in both is a woman, a direct contradiction in fact to the spoken words of the males.¹

The love theme echoing Lope's play, scarcely begun in Act II, develops in Act III. In the seventeenth century *La dama boba* Laurencio awakens the *boba* Finea through love from a state of simpleness to one of discretion and self-awareness. Lupe already demonstrates her consciousness of self which is the lesson acquired by Fenisa through love in Lope's play: "¡No me doy a conocer, porque no debo darme, pero soy como soy!"² In this twentieth-century version of the theme of awakening to love and self-knowledge the roles are reversed. It is the pretended "boba" Lupe who teaches/awakens Francisco, the "maestro" and *intended* Laurencio - love instructor of Lope's play (it was at this point he disappeared). As Act III begins Francisco begs Lupe's help in escaping from Tepán by providing him with clothing other than his seventeenth-century costume. In a long dialogue she gradually leads his attention to the poetic mysteries of woman and of love. At the end of this scene, as Avelino approaches, Lupe asks Francisco "¿Entonces qué? ¿Le llevo la ropa? He now answers "¿Qué ropa? ¿Qué fuga?" He has fallen in love/been awakened. Avelino continues with this lesson in reality perceived by the senses rather than by the intellect in a long discussion involving a poetic classification of women as representatives of nature, their power beyond that of men--*agua, pescado, hormiga arriera, pitona, pava* etc. Francisco is completely captivated by Lupe, having learned well his lesson.

Lupe: ¡A Ud. le gusta sólo lo que se ve de bulto!
Francisco: ¡No es cierto! Yo soy actor, me gustan las metamorfosis, por eso me gustas tú, porque en la noche te transformas en mil cosas (235).

He is thus completely captivated/awakened by Lupe.

Much of the second half of Act I is given to calling attention to traditional elements of Mexican culture. There is much talk about death and the introduction of such songs as "no vale nada la vida/la vida no vale nada . . . (192). "Si quieres que no te quiera/pídele a Dios que me muera" (197), "¡Ujujuu! ¡Que para morir nacimos!" These remind the audience of this Mexican cultural constant (Brodman). *Los tres jilotes* talk in a steady stream of folk aphorisms such as "Cuando uno anda por buena vereda es cuando halla al mal viandante!" and "El agua del pozo si no la sacan, ahí queda." (185) These characters are called upon for information about Francisco's absence since "Ellos son los únicos que deben muertes en Coapa"(185), and one is asked "¿Qué se te ocurre a ti, que conoces la suerte del hombre?"

(187). "Jilote" means a young ear of corn and is a symbol of fertility and regeneration in the pre-Colombian cultures of Mexico (Thompson 350-54). Besides these folk beliefs and customs there is mention of foods of Indian origin (for example "huitlacoche"). Act I ends with a songfest with guitars, tequila, and "licor de tejocate."

A reminiscence of Mexican indigenous culture combined with the European culture also occurs toward the end of this act. While sitting alone, the girls who play Celia and Finea in Lope's play are approached by a weeping woman with a basket who insists that they are orphans. She tells them: "Ay ¡qué triste es la suerte de los huérfanos!" (193). This is an evocation of *La Llorona*, a mythic figure with roots in Aztec mythology. The two cultures come into contact as these representatives of the European culture deal with this unreal figure from the indigenous past. The *jilotes*, who are described as having extra-human characteristics (they are "owed deaths" and "know the fate of men"), also represent a meeting of the two cultures since they both represent traditional beliefs and also play roles evocative of the three fates of Greek tragedy.³ *Voz del público*, serving as a Greek chorus, also reflects the classical theater tradition of European culture while speaking from the indigenous inhabitants' point of view. This collective character underscores the cultural difference between the European and indigenous worlds by repeating the desire to gain a more profound knowledge of the magical, the wonder of nature: "¡Yo quiero que me enseñe cómo crecen los árboles! ¡Repito que quiero que me enseñe a hacer túneles como lo que hacen las hormigas" (245). Of course, the European tradition of erudition does not provide lessons in the wonders of nature as the rural intuition-and-folklore-based culture does. It is worth noting at this point Mircea Eliade's words on the meeting of these two cultures:

One day the West will have to know and to understand the existential situations and the cultural universes of the non-Western peoples; moreover, the West will come to value them as integral with the history of the human spirit and will no longer regard them as immature episodes or as aberrations from an exemplary History of man. . . . (7)

At the end of Act III, just as Avelino and the townspeople, all dressed in seventeenth-century costume, begin a surprise party for Francisco, the sound of a motor is heard. The troupe members of *Teatro del Pueblo* appear, astonished to see the set for *La dama boba* and the people wearing seventeenth-century dress. One demonstrates the dominant culture's ignorance by believing this is their normal dress: "¿Te imaginas las caras que van a poner en México, cuando les contemos que encontramos un pueblo en el que todavía los habitantes van vestidos como en el siglo diecisiete?" (238). Tara, who played Finea in the presentation of Lope's play, adds: "¡Es asombroso!

Juan José Arreola tenía razón: era necesario esta cruzada cultural" (238), thus calling attention to the theme of the cultural dichotomy, and suggesting the juxtaposition of a well-known twentieth century Mexican author of tales of fantasy and illusion to the famous seventeenth century Spanish playwright and creator of the fantasy and illusion which inspired this play. Francisco finds himself torn by his newly acquired perception and love for Lupe and the insistence of the Finea of the company who draws him back into the dominant culture. She comments disparagingly about Lupe: "Qué indita tan graciosa" . . . an unflattering perception of rural culture on her part and an unflattering characterization by Garro of the dominant mestizo/city culture.

Garro's text also makes use of Lope's text to manifest her preoccupation with time, to dramatize her concept of the nature of fantasy/reality, and to structure the metatheatrical aspects of the play. Francisco proposes that the group put on *La dama boba* for the town:

. . . para que sepan lo que es el teatro. Verá Ud. que *La dama boba* es una lección, pero no es una lección. Sólo existe unos minutos, y no pasa en este tiempo, ni en ningún tiempo y los actores vivimos siendo lo que no somos en un tiempo imaginario y somos tantos y tan variados, y vivimos en tantos tiempos diferentes, que al final ya no sabemos ni quienes somos ni lo que fuimos. (241)

Here Garro inserts the five beginning speeches of Act I, scene vii of Lope's play, the point at which Francisco was to reappear as Laurencio after exiting as the maestro but was kidnapped. Thus all the time transpired in the town, which is suggested to be about a month, is obliterated, and we are at the point about two minutes into the first act of the play within the play which we were watching the townspeople of Copán watch. This coincides with Garro's concept of time as circular and repetitive, a stance which corresponds with the beliefs of the preColumbian peoples. They saw time in two ways: as chronological and as circular. Chronological time represented earthly time during which it was a person's duty to travail with the goal of uniting matter and spirit. Once these were united, one passed to another level of being in which time became circular or eternal, uncounted, idyllic (Nicholson, et al.). The representation here of the time in the town is as circular, magical, idyllic and eternal, unmeasured and unmeasurable. When the play, representing European culture, resumes, time again is measured as chronological time. Garro's representation of the town's life as taking place in unmeasured or idyllic time affirms her belief in the value of this way of life and negates the European culture which lives in chronological, nonidyllic time. Her presentation of the two cultures existing in two different kinds of time thus serves to contrast the two cultures in conflict, emphasizing her preference for the indigenous way of life. The value of understanding this way of life is described by Eliade as:

... this confrontation with "the others" helps Western man better to understand himself. The effort expended in correctly understanding ways of thinking that are foreign to the Western rationalist tradition ... is repaid by a considerable enrichment of consciousness. (9)

The strength of the cultural dichotomy decides the end of the play. Although Francisco begs Lupe to tell him to stay, she refuses, saying he would be happy only for a short time. He leaves with his companions. At the loss of their conduit to learning and the dominant culture, Antonio says: "¡De verdad! Somos los olvidados de la suerte." Avelino replies: "Mañana escribo a México para que nos manden un maestro . . ." (246), thus returning to his preoccupation at the beginning of the play for which he kidnapped Francisco, bringing this theme full circle. He still seeks that which will allow the townspeople to enter the mainstream culture. Thus the two cultures here have still not reached an understanding. The dominated culture continues to struggle for authenticity and attention in the eyes of the dominant group. The stage directions for the last scene indicate "Cae una gran melancolía sobre las gentes y el cielo olvidado de Tepán. Es el crepúsculo." (246), thus reiterating with the scenery the feelings of rejection and abandonment of the town.

Garro's text is obviously both inspired by Lope's text and served by its actual words. We can trace the use of language and the metatheatrical stance of the characters (Tara/Finea, Lupe/Finea, Francisco/Maestro/Laurencio) in developing the idea of appearance/reality, in the development of the theme of love as educator, and in the criticism of the role of woman ironically negated by the strong women characters created. This piece of classical Spanish theatre of the Golden Age also provides a cultural foil for the development of the encounter between the two cultures just as they met during the colonial period. But while the Golden Age Drama which inspired Garro's theatrical piece served to promote cultural unity, she uses it ironically as the basis of her text illustrating the opposite. The lesson in this twentieth-century encounter is that the two cultures are still worlds apart.

This conclusion is reinforced in the contrasting endings of the two plays. As was typical in the Golden Age, comedies commonly ended with "all the loose ends tied" in betrothals, thus symbolizing with the social/religious institution of marriage the unity (real or desired) of the culture. Thus Lope's play ends with the ladies attached to a socially appropriate gentleman. However, in Garro's play the opposite is true. The pair Lupe/Francisco is sundered by the *lack* of cultural integration/unity thus reflecting the melancholic ending described in the stage directions and again underscoring this sad state of cultures in conflict.

In this meeting of the two cultures provided on yet another plane by Garro in her creation of a play so intertwined with the reality of Lope's seventeenth-century play, she succeeds in restating her preoccupations about the valuation of women, the nature of reality, the magical realistic heritage of

the indigenous population, her philosophical conception of time, and her profound appreciation of the master Lope de Vega. It might well be an unconscious identification with him which led her to state about *La dama boba* in an interview recently, "I wrote it in two days," a common feat and boast of Lope (Muncy, "Encuentro").

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Notes

1. For other discussions of Garro's presentations of women's roles, the following articles are important. In "Rebeldes fracasadas: una lectura feminista de 'Andarse por las ramas' y 'La señora en su balcón,'" Gabriela Mora describes Garro's radical departure from societally assigned roles for women. Sandra Messinger Cypess' study "Visual and Verbal Distances in the Mexican Theater: The Plays of Elena Garro" explains how Garro's female characters contribute to a unique and positive image of women. Gloria Feman Orenstein studies Garro's heroines in *Los pilares de doña Blanca* and *El Encanto, tendajón mixto* as exemplary of the surrealist ideal woman in *Theater of the Marvelous: Surrealism and the Contemporary Stage*.

2. This resembles another theme of Golden Age Drama: "Soy quien soy" which relates the idea of a mature awareness of self and background as the basis for true nobility. Leo Spitzer relates this theme to Shakespeare's famous line "to thine own self be true" (*Hamlet* 1, 3), and develops it etymologically from the Biblical "Sum qui sum." He defines the meaning of the expression in Golden Age Drama as a consciousness of self and circumstance.

3. Such a coming together of disparate elements from the European and indigenous cultures configuring a new historical reality which subverts conventional patterns of Western rationality may be described as magic realism or marvelous realism. (Duncan, 210; and Chiampi, 35).

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