

## A Woman's Place: Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Morality and the Spanish American Domestic Comedy

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Arnold Hauser, writing on "The Origins of Domestic Drama," has stated that "When a public wishes to see . . . class characteristics emphasized in the human portraiture, [it] is always a sign that society has become class-conscious" (410). The four Spanish American nineteenth-century domestic comedies included in this study—*Las convulsiones* (Colombia, 1828) by Luis Vargas Tejada, *Frutos de la educación* (Peru, 1829) by Felipe Pardo y Aliaga, *A ninguna de las tres* (Mexico, 1839?) by Fernando Calderón, and *Ña Catita* (Peru, 1856) by Manuel Ascencio Segura—thematize class consciousness specifically in terms of gender identity and corresponding codes of proper social behavior. Indeed, these comedies underscore some of the most profound and intimate connections between gender identity and class consciousness, connections legitimating the distribution of power between men and women.

The social realism of these plays characterizes an emergent Spanish American *costumbrista* theatre whose primary purpose is to project a strong sense of national culture and middle class identity. In *Teatro hispanoamericano*, Agustín del Saz traces the development of Spanish American national theatre throughout the nineteenth century based on the imitation and transformation of European models.<sup>1</sup> While Spanish and French plays did remain popular throughout the century, Spanish American theatre was steadily transforming itself into a "teatro criollo de la burguesía de clase media" (215-6), the mouthpiece for bourgeois political, economic, and social aspirations.

Leandro Fernández de Moratín's work provides the most obvious paradigm for the domestic-matrimonial themes of these comedies. Moratín's view of the *comedia* as the exclusive domain of the bourgeoisie in its process of self-examination and subsequent moral correction inspires each Spanish American comedy's dénouement:

Busque en la clase media de la sociedad los argumentos [y] los personajes . . . Debe, pues, ceñirse la buena comedia a presentar aquellos frecuentes extravíos que nacen . . . del abuso de la autoridad doméstica y de las falsas máximas que la dirigen . . . capaces de turbar la armonía, la decencia, el placer social. . . (34-6)

While Romantic plays of the same period—historical, exotic, European, and Golden Age in theme—literally take the spectator worlds away from the contemporary social environment, in the domestic comedy, "la sala decentemente amueblada"<sup>2</sup> identifies the middle class household as the locus of decency—the moral core of the social organism.

What defines in essence the bourgeois moral and domestic values these comedies represent? Primarily, male and female realms must be identified as two separate, mutually exclusive spheres of activity. As Mark Poster describes in *Critical Theory of the Family*, for the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie, the world of business and commerce constituted the masculine realm; the hallowed inner sanctum of the home was designated primarily as the feminine domain, with "bourgeois women . . . confined [there] as never before" (170). This description aptly characterizes the aspirations and values of the Spanish American bourgeoisie depicted in these four comedies.

Poster maintains that during the nineteenth century femininity was appropriated in order to "promote the interests of the new dominant class" (177); thus, for both men and women femininity had to embody an acceptable set of social values and behaviors geared towards fostering class stability. In these comedies, the literary appropriation and transformation of the feminine ideal away from passionate and sensual Romantic prototypes is decisive in defining middle class respectability. Domestic comedy strives to put woman in her proper place inside the home and keep her there, placidly fulfilling, in the words of one character, "las dulces obligaciones/ de su estado y de su sexo" (Calderón 195).

In order to justify the confinement of middle class women as both good and necessary for social progress, feminine virtue must constitute the measure of a woman's worth, her most prized and fragile asset, an asset which both

sexes must protect from internal as well as external threats. The external threats to a woman's virtue are easy to identify in these comedies; it is self-will which defines the internal threat each young woman poses to herself and which provides the key to our understanding of the specific construction of gender identity embodied in the plays. Herein lies the contradiction implicit in this middle class concept of femininity: the idealization and exaltation of feminine virtue co-exists alongside the underlying fear that female passions—intellectual as well as sexual—are insatiable and destructive, and that women must be saved from themselves by fathers and husbands.<sup>3</sup> We perceive the tensions of this contradiction in these domestic comedies where proper middle class femininity operates as a trope signifying the trap of inviolate interiority of both body and home. These comedies insinuate that when the mechanisms of paternal authority over wives and daughters do not function properly, the unrestrained forces of femininity generate domestic chaos.

Historical sources confirm that the middle class in Latin America viewed marriage as an institution consolidating and actualizing the highest ideals of both church and state.

Since the family in Latin America was regarded as the pillar of society, it is not surprising that the nurturance and preservation of marriage and the family was one of the main concerns of the state and the church. While the state provided a legal basis for the family, . . . the church watched over the moral aspects of marriage, the family, and of women. In the case of the latter, their "predestination" to marriage and the domestic sphere was sanctioned by the church. (Kuznesof and Oppenheimer 217)

In his comprehensive study of "Sexo y matrimonio en la sociedad tradicional," Ricardo Rodríguez Molas describes middle class courtship in the nineteenth century as "una suerte de endogamia económica":

La elección de la pareja, el cortejo, imponía nuevos estilos en las relaciones de los sexos. Pero no nos engañemos, se trata de una elección determinada siempre por la propiedad, ejercida en un ámbito donde los padres . . . controlaban a los jóvenes. Era una ilusión de libertad. (39)

Rodríguez Molas concludes that despite the attenuation of paternal authority in the home during the nineteenth century, within the middle class, "siguiendo en líneas generales el modelo europeo, la mujer queda reducida . . . a una

condición de inferioridad que no difiere de la anterior" (36). In general, middle class women who desired an education or the freedom to choose their own husbands—women who expressed desires contrary to those of their parents—fell short of the ideal standards set for daughters and wives.<sup>4</sup>

In 1978, José Juan Arróm concluded his study entitled "Cambiantes imágenes de la mujer en el teatro de la América virreinal" with an optimistic description of the increasingly emancipated Spanish American woman's dramatic representation in the nineteenth century:

[C]on el transcurso de los años se observa una creciente aceptación de algunos de los derechos femeninos: el derecho a la educación, el derecho a elegir libremente a su compañero, el derecho a no ser siempre la culpada de las desventuras matrimoniales. (14)

Arróm's comment is consonant with the historical documentation confirming that any sort of social headway women did enjoy during the nineteenth century was by and large restricted to the domestic-matrimonial sphere.<sup>5</sup> However, he suggests an opening up of options and prospects for women in complete contrast with the motifs of enclosure and female culpability we discover in these domestic comedies.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, these comedies reinforce what Fredric Jameson refers to as a protonarrative or class fantasy (a concept to which we will return below) depicting the dangers of feminine liberal education, the absolute necessity of paternal guidance in the choice of a husband, and the domestic crises precipitated primarily by feminine wiles. Strategies of containment of the feminine define in essence the didactics of middle class domesticity.

First and foremost, feminine sexuality must be thoroughly repressed; passion is an undesirable attribute in a young girl aspiring to matrimony. Female passion is synonymous with *Convulsiones*, the title of Luis Vargas Tejada's *sainete*. Crispina's convulsions, occurring whenever she does not get her own way, operate as a sexual metaphor and characterize her as a girl who gives full rein to all of her physical impulses. She is forward and flirtatious, unabashedly informing her suitor: "si usted sabe de pasiones, / mi amor calcule por mis convulsiones" (48).

Her father don Gualberto complains that he is losing his money and his patience because of her convulsions. Yet he continues indulging her every whim until he finally realizes that the suitor, disguised as a doctor, is having a tryst with Crispina in his own house. Don Gualberto beats them both at the end of the play, and tells Crispina that the problem has been her laziness. "Usted, doña Crispina, en adelante / no me ha de estar ociosa ni un instante"

(63); the thimble and needle will cure her convulsions. We finally discover that don Gualberto has been remiss in the performance of his fatherly duties, which include beating some sense into his daughter: if thimble and needle "tampoco bastan / para librar mi casa de este azote, / le darán convulsiones al garrote" (63). Crispina begs forgiveness, and Don Gualberto's closing speech in the play censures the shallowness of women: "¡Pobres mujeres! de exterior se pagan, / y las sólidas prendas nunca indagan" (63).

In Felipe Pardo y Aliaga's *Frutos de la educación*, a conservative critique of local Peruvian customs and etiquette, a young woman's similar lack of physical restraint convinces her suitor that she would be unsuitable as a wife. The highly desirable English suitor don Eduardo must renege on his engagement to Pepita when he discovers that she has danced the *zamacueca*, a local African dance. After seeing Pepita perform the dance, don Eduardo declares that she does not possess the attributes he seeks in a wife, which Pepita's uncle Manuel has summarized as "las sagradas / Obligaciones de esposa, / De madre y de ama de casa" (50). The girl's mother takes offense at her brother's criticism of Peruvian culture. Just because he has returned from Europe with a different set of values, she sees no need to condemn the local customs giving pleasure to everyone and hurting no one. "Juana," her brother chastises,

[Agradan] muchas cosas,  
 Que, sin embargo, son malas;  
 Y hay muchas habilidades,  
 Que a un marido no hacen gracia . . .  
 Porque con decencia no hay  
 Zamacueca bien bailada. (152)

*Las convulsiones* and *Frutos de la educación* confirm the notion that proper middle class men are offended by forthright displays of sensuality and the lack of feminine modesty and inhibition: passion has no place among a woman's sacred domestic duties. In *Frutos de la educación*, sensuality expressed through dance may be permissible for the lower classes and the mixed races, but it is a clear indication to don Eduardo of

Cosas, que aunque no me atrevo  
 A llamar irregulares,  
 Un carácter muy diverso  
 Indican, por mi desgracia,  
 Del que en mi esposa deseo. (139-40)

Don Eduardo voices the "ideology of passionlessness" (Cott 221) characterizing the feminine ideal. The threat to "middle-class virtue and domestic security" is removed only when "modesty and demureness [take] center stage among the female virtues enshrined" (Cott 223-4). Thus, Pepita loses her prim English suitor with his ten thousand *pesos*, while Crispina has allowed herself to be duped by a seductive ne'er-do-well whose intentions are less than honorable and who detests work: his opinion of middle class enterprise is summed up when he asks,

¿Podrá acaso sufrir el más paciente  
una vida tan triste y tan mezquina  
como es la de un empleado de oficina?  
(Vargas Tejada 12)

The male protagonists of these comedies embody the masculine ideal expressed through the bourgeois attributes of wealth, industriousness, and pious prudery, while the villains are all lecherous, indolent, and spendthrift. Implicit in this middle class libidinal economy is the sense of passion as profligate in a man as it is unseemly in a woman.

The politics of feminine education are at stake in Fernando Calderón's *A ninguna de las tres*. According to Frank Dauster (13) and Francisco Monterde (xii-xiv), this comedy satirizes the deficient education women receive, yet in the final analysis, at least as far as one daughter is concerned, the reader must question both the critics and the play's definition of deficient education. All three daughters are ridiculed for carrying their literary interests to absurd extremes, and the comedy clearly suggests that all feminine education not pertaining to homemaking must be very carefully supervised and restricted.

Each of the three daughters has a different literary inclination: María reads nothing but the fashion magazines, Leonor is addicted to romantic novels, while Clara studies political science, journalism, and the classics in Latin. Leonor is the most obvious choice as a wife for Don Juan, the son of a good friend of the girls' father, but her romantic sensibilities are so extravagant that she prefers her books to real life, professing Goethe's Werther to be her ideal man.

Clara is the only daughter who actually has something sensible to say, yet Francisco Monterde, in his introduction to the play, interprets her intellectual and feminist concerns as false feminine erudition (xiii). Perhaps Clara does quote Ovid in Latin too frequently, but she also reveals an active and genuine interest in current political issues. We might even conclude that her fervent

patriotism would qualify her as a protagonist, since the play very clearly exalts Mexican nationalism and derides the mania for imitating Europe. However, it does not; Don Carlos, the suitor's friend, encourages Clara to express her opinions in order to scoff at her behind her back.

Clara believes that women possess the same intellectual and moral capacities as men:

Yo no sé por qué injusticia  
se ha quitado a nuestro sexo  
un derecho tan sagrado  
como legislar. Yo creo  
que lo hiciéramos mejor  
que muchos hombres; y luego  
no encuentro razón alguna  
para no tener empleos  
en otros ramos. (95)

Naturally, such a belief was rejected during the nineteenth century by all but the most radical feminists. Don Antonio, a friend of the girls' father, strongly disapproves of the way in which Don Timoteo has permitted his daughters to follow their own inclinations. Young women should study music, painting, and dancing, always provided they avoid excesses.

When Don Juan decides that he cannot choose a wife from among the three daughters, Don Antonio explains:

un hombre de juicio recto,  
elegirá por esposa  
una mujer que cumpliendo  
su deber, cuide su casa,  
. . . que si dedica  
a la lectura algún tiempo,  
no quiera pasar por sabia . . .  
La compostura, el aseo,  
usar sin afectación,  
y vivir siempre cumpliendo  
las dulces obligaciones  
de su estado y de su sexo . . .  
he aquí . . . las virtudes de una esposa. (195)

Intellectual achievement is banished, along with physical spontaneity, beyond the realm of acceptable feminine conduct. Both Monterde and Dauster fail to acknowledge any distinction between the caricatured Romantic sensibilities expressed in Leonor's tears and sighs and the legitimate content of Clara's speeches asserting her defense of equal rights. Obviously it is Calderón's intention to satirize Clara's opinions and aspirations, and to make her appear as absurd as Leonor, if not more so. But should the twentieth-century reader continue to perceive Clara as such a thoroughly ridiculous figure?

Don Antonio represents the voice of reason in this comedy, and he denounces Clara's pedantry as "falsa instrucción" (194), which judgment Dauster and Monterde have not challenged. I would argue that in spite of himself, Calderón has imbued Clara with admirable qualities; he has created the portrait of a fervent nationalist who insists that all good citizens should read the newspaper every day and be aware of what the government is doing (89-91). The unequivocal message of the comedy is, however, that Clara would not make a good wife.

Manuel Ascensio Segura's comedy, *Ña Catita*, depicts a marriage on the verge of disintegrating because the parents fight constantly over the choice of a husband for their daughter. Doña Rufina's choice is Don Alejo, a middle-aged fashion plate with a penchant for speaking four languages at the same time, and she enlists the aid of an elderly *beata*, Ña Catita, in order to leave her husband and force her daughter Juliana to marry Don Alejo. Juliana decides to elope with Manuel, the man she loves and her father's choice, rather than obey her mother.

Don Jesús characterizes his wife and his household in demonic terms:

¡Qué mujer! ¡Si es una víbora!  
 . . . ¡Qué carácter tan satánico!  
 Así son todas, idénticas,  
 . . . Esto es un infierno diario. (81)

Doña Rufina retorts by inferring that her husband ignores the fact that Manuel simply wants to seduce their daughter: "El diablo mete la cola / cuando uno menos lo espera" (81).

This final diabolical metaphor clearly refers to the violation of interiority—of both house and daughter. In this same sense Ña Catita represents an external force penetrating the sanctity of the familial sphere, encouraging the estrangement between husband and wife and facilitating Don Alejo's seduction of Juliana, whom he has no intention of marrying as he



already has a wife. When a friend of the family exposes Don Alejo, Don Jesús condemns Ña Catita for being

una vieja endemoniada,  
 que, con capa de virtud,  
 nos ha hecho aquí una ensalada  
 de la casa y la salud.  
 De ésas, . . . que hay en Lima,  
 . . . a millares,  
 que . . . se tragarán los pilares  
 de la casa de más cima. (157-8)

He concludes, "desde hoy . . . / he de adoptar otro plan" (161) to protect his reputation and control his wife and daughter. Doña Rufina declares herself properly chastised at the end of the play and promises always to give in to her husband's will in all matters: "Siempre sumisa a tu lado / haré que todos me vean" (163).

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson contends that class discourse is organized around minimal units or ideologemes. An ideologeme is identifiable either as a "conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, . . . or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the . . . classes in opposition" (87). Literature transforms the raw materials or abstract beliefs and values of an ideological system into legitimated and transmissible cultural expectations and standards of behavior. Legitimation necessarily implies the presence, albeit suppressed, of an antagonistic discourse; the literary text becomes the site of "an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation [between] the irreconcilable demands and positions of antagonistic classes" (85). Naturally, the antagonistic discourse is appropriated as an illustration of negative and dangerous values.

[Since] by definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration . . . of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence. . . . (85)

If we accept the proposition that in patriarchal society women constitute an antagonistic class, the social organizations adopted by the nineteenth-

century Spanish American bourgeoisie simply represent more cultural variations of those same "forms of alienation specific to the oldest mode of production of human history, with its division of labor between men and women" (Jameson 99-100). We have seen that the essential ideologeme or class fantasy in these comedies depicts unrestrained women as a threat to social stability and advancement. One extremely important component of this ideologeme is based upon the insistence that women are incapable of making correct decisions about their daughters' or their own welfare. This class fantasy legitimates social practices based upon the implicit notion that women can undermine the entire social order if they are not kept in check by husbands and fathers.

Yet the antagonistic discourse of the opposing class has not been completely silenced or stifled in these plays. In spite of themselves, the authors of these plays have, to a certain extent, represented both sides of the "strategic ideological confrontation" (Jameson 85) taking place within the middle class. The "essentially polemic and subversive strategies" (Jameson 86) of an opposing ideologeme affirm the femininity of the expressive female body and mind—in the case of the dancing Pepita and the nationalistic Clara. The wages of sin, however, are lost suitors. These women must be shamed, shown the error of their ways, and taught to comport themselves properly. Their actions and opinions must be officially proscribed, that is, censured and silenced in writing and on the stage.

Jameson maintains that a class discourse ultimately reflects the larger unity of the social system (89). Middle class women in these comedies are either good or bad commodities, and are thus implicated within the wider economic system of exchange, where suitors seek to avoid risky business ventures and foolish investments. The unrestrained forces of femininity I spoke of at the beginning of this essay signify, above all else, extravagance and excess—the antitheses of bourgeois thrift and decorum.

This fantasy continues to be sustained by the reader or spectator failing to recognize the ideological constraints of a system invested in restricting women's intellects, bodies, and gender identity by restricting acceptable expressions of femininity. My analysis of these domestic comedies has attempted to expose the class fantasy underlying the literary images of the only good woman as the one deadened by those sweet domestic obligations.

## Notes

1. Refer to chapters six ("El teatro hispanoamericano en el siglo XIX"), seven ("El teatro mexicano del siglo XIX"), and eight ("El teatro romántico realista") 135-218.

2. The stage directions of three of the comedies (*Frutos de la educación*, *A ninguna de las tres*, and *Ña Caiita*) employ this phrase.

2. Carol F. Karlsen's study of witchcraft in colonial New England, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), provides an excellent basis for my brief discussion of social constructions of knowledge as operating on both implicit and explicit levels in the case of these domestic comedies. When ideas about women deemed "more suitable to the social order" replace older "established 'truths'" (154), the latter, far from disappearing, continue to operate on an implicit level, thus preventing any real challenge to a society's worldview. Karlsen has identified the social contradictions inherent in the new Puritan doctrines which exalted women's roles as spiritual and domestic helpmeets to their husbands, while "the many connections between 'women' and 'witchcraft'" (154) continued to operate on an implicit level of consciousness and became explicit once again during the period of witchcraft accusations and trials. Refer to chapter five, "Handmaidens of the Lord" (153-181).

3. Refer to Asunción Lavrin, ed., *Latin American Women. Historical Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978) 316.

4. Asunción Lavrin indicates that while more and more nineteenth-century reformers shared a belief in the importance of women's education, "they had not abandoned the main assumption underlying all education for women: their preparation was to serve better their ultimate destiny as wives and mothers. Reformism did not amount to radicalism" (304). Refer to "Some final considerations on trends and issues in Latin American women's history" 302-332.

5. While some of these playwrights were certainly more socially progressive than others (this is especially evident in Calderón and Ascencio Segura, whereas Pardo y Aliaga's political and social conservatism is patent throughout his work), this progressivism never really influences their characterization of women and of feminine social parameters. The only viable option available to women is marriage.

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