

## Sor Juana as Feminist Playwright: The *Gracioso's* Satiric Function in *Los empeños de una casa*

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"Sor Juana . . . embraced the world as a woman," according to Electa Arenal (102), who also notes that the Mexican nun "aimed unrelentingly . . . at stimulating changes in the social relations between the sexes" (99). Sor Juana's 1683 *comedia Los empeños de una casa* offers several manifestations of these feminist beliefs (the term "feminist" to be used hereafter in Arenal's dual sense of perspective and activism). The two primary female characters, Doña Leonor de Castro and Doña Ana de Arellano, both prove themselves to be strong-willed women who assert their own autonomy rather than passively submit to masculine control over their lives and futures. Doña Leonor is particularly interesting from a feminist standpoint; Sor Juana endows the character with her own independence, love of learning and early intellectual renown, which prompts Octavio Paz to applaud this "momento en que emerge . . . la realidad de un personaje que se escapa del prototipo convencional de la *dama joven*" (436). However, this paper will focus exclusively on the feminist implications of the *gracioso* Castaño's extended masquerade as Doña Leonor. This Golden Age version of a present-day "drag performance" creates within the play what Elaine Showalter calls a "double-voiced discourse." As Showalter argues, women's self-expression cannot exist independently of male-centered ideology: ". . . all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it" (262). Women's writing therefore constitutes a double-voiced discourse in which both socially "dominant" and socially "muted" voices manifest themselves (266). One voice in *Los empeños* reflects and reinforces the dominant patriarchal ideology of Sor Juana's culture through a closure process described by Catherine Belsey as "the reestablishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have

preceded the events of the story itself" (70). But while Castaño's inept assumption of conventional female behavior might amuse the audience as part of the convoluted process of reestablishing order, at the same time it satirizes such sexist conventions. The voice of the "muted"—of women—speaks out through this satire, which introduces a feminist discourse into *Los empeños*.

Cross-dressing in Golden Age theatre frequently reflected the misogyny which flourished during the era. The sharply divergent attitudes toward female and male cross-dressing indirectly expressed in various *comedias* make it clear that behavior defined as "masculine" was valued more highly than behavior defined as "feminine". Women who assume masculine personas most often grow in dramatic stature as a result, while men who assume feminine personas make themselves objects of ridicule. In Tirso's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, for example, Doña Juana must adopt a male identity in order to outwit and win back her faithless lover Don Martín. As Darcy Donahue points out, Juana distinguishes herself as a charismatic heroine enriched by and rewarded for the realization of her previously dormant masculine aspects (177). Furthermore, Juana is only one among many similar *comedia* heroines, including Rosaura in *La vida es sueño*. On the other hand, Tirso's *El Aguilas* provides us with a revealing example of male cross-dressing. Here Achilles's fearful, overprotective mother Thetis disguises her son as a woman in order to keep him out of the upcoming war against Troy. Much of the *comedia*'s humor stems from the manly hero's failure to adapt his behavior to his gown and high heels, and Ulysses ultimately shames him into shedding his disguise and joining the fight. Thus, the woman pretending to be a man does so honorably and successfully, while the man's masquerade is dishonorable and unsuccessful. Finally, misogyny can also be discerned in the contrast between the strength of Doña Juana's easily invoked inner masculinity and the total absence of any corresponding inner femininity within Achilles.

Misogyny, which was so deeply embedded in the dominant ideology of Sor Juana's culture, is a primary target of satire in *Los empeños*. Sor Juana's choice of the *gracioso* Castaño as the vehicle of that satire is logical. As F. William Forbes points out, the *gracioso* is descended from the "feast of fools" tradition and from the court jester, often serving to expose through his mockery the purely arbitrary nature of otherwise rarely-examined social constructs (80-81). Sor Juana subverts the misogynist tradition of *comedia* cross-dressing by choosing it as her means of generating the desired satire. As Peter Ackroyd explains in his study *Dressing Up*, all instances of cross-dressing can be divided into two types: transvestism and drag. Transvestism, or the serious effort to impersonate the opposite sex, implicitly reinforces the prevailing sociosexual standards, while drag, which is comic in nature, mocks

them (14). In the words of theatre analyst Mark Gevisser, drag "can be a radically subversive theatrical weapon, for it critiques gender roles as no other art form can" (41). Castaño's masquerade is unmistakably drag, and its critique of Golden Age gender roles is not a common feature of the *comedia*. While many Golden Age dramatists did explore issues surrounding women's rights and abilities, Melveena McKendrick points out that the patriarchal ideology of the time was most often not seriously challenged:

The playwrights' approach was a practical one which, although in many ways laudably broadminded, was for the most part ultimately circumscribed by the attitudes of their age and society. Their views, in other words, were liberal without . . . being revolutionary. (327)

Castaño's satiric masquerade in *Los empeños* seems to indicate that the same cannot be said of Sor Juana's views.

The plot of *Los empeños de una casa* revolves around a manipulative brother and sister, Don Pedro and Doña Ana de Arellano, and their respective efforts to trap Doña Leonor de Castro and Don Carlos de Olmedo in their matrimonial snares. It would be difficult to say which sibling is less principled. Doña Ana has already discarded her faithful suitor, Don Juan, in favor of the unwitting Carlos for no better reason than boredom with Juan's fidelity: "porque si él es ya tan mío," she demands, "¿qué tengo que desear?" (I, 147-48) Don Pedro's honor does not deter him from perjuring himself in order to gain Leonor's hand in marriage. And the fact that Carlos and Leonor happen to be in love with one another troubles neither sibling.

The *gracioso* Castaño's unwilling drag performance comes about as an indirect result of Pedro's total disregard for truth and honor as he pursues Leonor. Leonor herself precipitates much of the play's action by fleeing from her own home in order to elope with Carlos. In the process Carlos is forced to wound her cousin. Her father, however, believes Leonor to have been kidnapped against her will, and Don Pedro eagerly confesses to the fictitious crime, knowing full well that a forced marriage will result. Desperate to prevent such a turn of events, Carlos orders his servant Castaño to deliver a letter to Leonor's father explaining the truth. At first Castaño demurs, citing the fact that they are both prisoners in the de Arellano house and that the streets are filled with soldiers searching for the attacker of Leonor's cousin. Carlos insists, however, and leaves Castaño to devise a successful means of carrying out his orders. From this dilemma ensues the fourth scene of the third act, a long monologue for the *gracioso* during which he first ponders his predicament, then resorts to disguising himself as Doña Leonor using the

clothes which she entrusted to him during the elopement. His decision initiates what Ezequiel Chávez accurately perceives as a satire of "los trajes, las modas y las usanzas de aquellos tiempos" (96). However, Chávez also claims that the satire "no punza ni hiere" (96). On the contrary, Castaño's words and actions in *Los empeños* from this point onward represent effective feminist criticism of what Arenal labels "the specular role assumed involuntarily by women" in Sor Juana's culture (94).

Rather than changing clothes backstage and between scenes, Castaño's metamorphosis takes place in full view of the audience. The *gracioso's* first step is to discard the most overt symbols of his masculinity: hat, cloak, and above all the very phallic sword. Once "neutered," he proceeds to transform himself physically into a woman and mirror the physical change in his words, including the use of feminine adjectives for self-description. The first aspect of conventional female identity that the *gracioso* satirizes is self-definition based on surface appearance; even while still half-dressed he begins delighting in his "beauty."

¡Jesús, y qué rica tela!  
No hay duda que me esté bien,  
porque como soy morena  
me está del cielo lo azul. (III, 328-31)

Es cierto que estoy hermosa.  
¡Dios me guarde, que estoy bella!  
Cualquier cosa me está bien,  
porque el molde es rara pieza. (III, 352-55)

Doubtless the audiences of the day roared with laughter at the sight of a cross-dressed *gracioso* preening and posturing in such a way. But the humor also satirizes a convention that encouraged women to view themselves in literally superficial terms.

Castaño next mocks the public behavior to which women were expected to adhere:

Vaya, pues, de damería:  
menudo el paso, derecha  
la estatura, airoso el brío;  
inclinada la cabeza,  
un sí es no es, al un lado;  
la mano en el manto envuelta;

con el ojo recluso  
y con el otro de fuera . . . (III, 395-404)

As McKendrick writes of Golden Age society, "virtue, humility, modesty, tenderness, silence, diligence and prudence were still the most desirable attributes in a daughter and a wife" (12). Even when some *comedia* heroines departed from any of these guidelines, they often did so only to win desired *galanes*. Once successful, most heroines would then gladly return to the approved mode of behavior. Calderón demonstrates this turn of events in *La dama duende*. As spirited and self-reliant as Angela acts throughout the play, at its finale she becomes Don Manuel's obedient, silent betrothed. Furthermore, the onstage *dama* who completely rejected the socially sanctioned feminine mold might be punished by ultimately failing to marry at all, a good example being Fenisa in María de Zayas' *Traición en la amistad*. Her backstabbing and attempted seductions leave her without a prospective husband and without female friends as well. In both these cases the dominant sexist ideology is ultimately reinforced.

According to Everett Hesse, men and women in the Golden Age perceived each primarily as sex objects; furthermore, convention and tradition stipulated that only men could act as the pursuers (4-5). While each sex was objectifying the other, therefore, women were forced to carry the additional burden of passivity. Castaño alludes to this third social reality when he declares,

Ya estoy armado, y ¿quién duda  
que en el punto que me vean  
me sigan cuatro mil lindos  
de aquestos que galantean  
a salga lo que saliere,  
y que a bulto se amartelan,  
no de la belleza que es,  
sino de la que ellos piensan? (III, 387-94)

On one level, these lines amuse because the audience knows that any *lindo* falling in love with Castaño would be unwittingly falling in love with another man.<sup>1</sup> But as part of the feminist discourse the lines also call critical attention to the Golden Age conventions of male-female interaction. In addition, this critique of sexual objectification and masculine pursuit also serves as one premise for the scene that follows. When Castaño's monologue ends with the words "Temor llevo de que alguno / me enamore" (III, 405-6), Don Pedro

enters and immediately takes the *gracioso* for the woman whose clothes he wears: Doña Leonor, the unwilling object of the nobleman's passion. Here, in an encounter paradigmatic of the dominant contemporary ideology and its logical implications, the audience confronts the spectacle of a *galán* paying court to a *dama* of whose true nature he is completely ignorant.

Castaño's specific address to the women in the audience constitutes one last feature of feminist interest. In the *comedia*, it was not unusual for the *gracioso* or even for another character to acknowledge the public's presence and speak directly to them. As Catherine Belsey points out in relation to British theatre of the same period, the proscenium arch and its effect of framing the action within it had not yet come into being, making the relationship between players and spectators more fluid and unpredictable (97). In addition, *Los empeños* received its very first staging in the home of a Mexican public official, and such an intimate setting would have further facilitated actor-audience interaction (Flynn 112, n6). Castaño speaks to the female spectators twice in the course of his monologue. On the first occasion the servant, already quite taken with his own beauty, solicits the opinion of the female spectators: "—¿Qué les parece, Señoras, / este encaje de ballena?" (III, 349-50) Thus Castaño draws the women in the audience into a rapport with him and prepares them for the second, more important, occasion: a disclaimer asserting the artificiality of what the audience is witnessing.

Dama habrá en el auditorio  
que diga a su compañera:  
"Mariquita, aqueste bobo  
al Tapado representa."  
Pues atención, mis Señoras,  
que es paso de la comedia;  
no piensen que son embustes  
fraguados acá en mi idea,  
que yo no quiero engañarlas . . .  
(III, 377-85)

The messages sent by the double-voiced discourse here contradict one another. One message reassures any uneasy spectators that this *comedia* is only irrelevant and insignificant make-believe, yet by what Susan Sontag has described as "the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms" (11) irrelevance and insignificance must suggest relevance and significance. And the specific address to the women in the audience helps alert these particular spectators to the fact that, in the words of Frank Dauster, "sí hay mordacidad

en el chiste" (51). Naturally, it is unlikely that all the men in Sor Juana's audience conformed to the sexist, oppressive attitudes satirized in *Los empeños* and were therefore blind to the satire's presence. However, as Showalter asserts, "women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole" (260). The great majority of the female public, by virtue of their common experience as women, would be far more likely than any male to discern the feminist discourse at work beneath the humor of Castaño's masquerade.

There clearly exists a double-voiced feminist discourse in *Los empeños de una casa*. This discourse effectively criticizes certain rarely-questioned conventions of female identity and behavior, as well as acknowledging and invoking the sense of community among the play's female spectators. Its very presence gives *Los empeños de una casa* a distinctly modern quality, separates it from most other Golden Age dramas and makes it worthy of even further examination.

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## Notes

1. It should be noted that even on this primary level, such a scenario's humor is rooted in the rigidity of gender role expectations. Homosexual actions represent a transgression of the standards of masculine behavior. Comedy results when the actions are clearly unintentional, and the hilarity invariably reaches its peak when the male wooer realizes his error, as occurs when Don Pedro discovers the true identity of "Doña Leonor" in the last scene of *Los empeños*. It should also be noted that this heterosexist joke never seems to go out of style, as Charles Durning's ardent pursuit of a cross-dressed Dustin Hoffman in the film *Tootsie* proved less than a decade ago.

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