

DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS

The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs
Dramaturgy Packet

The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs
by Ana Caro

Dramaturgy packet compiled by Rafael Jaime

Based on the translation by
The UCLA Working Group on the *Comedia* in Translation and Performance
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Erick González and Zulema Clares in *Valor, agravio y mujer*.
Photos by Michael Palma Mir

The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs

A play by Ana Caro

Written by one of the Spanish Golden Age's most accomplished female playwrights, Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs* is a comedy of wild intrigue and lively ingenuity, in which Leonor crosses geographical boundaries and defies gender expectations in order to bring her fickle lover, Juan, to justice and restore her lost honor. Disguised as the dashing Leonardo, she travels from Seville to Brussels, where she finds Juan and initiates her shrewd plan for revenge. What follows is a hilarious feat of masterful maneuvering, replete with cross-dressing and unexpected twists, as she repeatedly outwits the men around her. While the thrill of Leonor's efforts to seek redress culminates with the expected restoration of her honor and marriage to Juan, the questions raised by her demands for justice make the play anything but conventional. Through this stirring tale of a woman's courage to right the wrongs she has suffered, the play holds up to scrutiny contemporary notions of masculine honor and offers in their place a vision that opens up space for women and their agency.

Synopsis With her reputation in shambles after the man who had promised her marriage abandons her, Leonor pursues her lover Don Juan from Seville to Brussels in order to seek redress for that wrong—an adventure she can only accomplish in male guise. Once in Brussels, she finds Don Juan already busy seducing another woman, Estela. Leonor, pretending to be Leonardo, sets out to seduce Estela in order to thwart Juan's new attempted conquest and to force him to publicly confess his wrongdoing. Once he confesses, Leonor, still in disguise, plans to force him into a duel and restore her honor through the death of her one-time lover. Before the final duel where she will force his confession takes place, however, Leonor uses the cover of darkness to deceive Don Juan as he and Prince Ludovico attempt to court Estela. Posing as an unknown man, Leonor reminds Don Juan of his behavior back in Seville and forces him to review his old feelings for her. In his confusion, Don Juan confesses his ill deeds in Seville, while "Leonardo" reveals he is in fact in love with Leonor and has come to Brussels to defend her honor. This prompts Juan to sudden and unexpected jealousy. As the duel is about to take place, Fernando interrupts the two with swords in hand. Forced to reckon with his past actions by Leonor's rhetorical prowess, Juan declares his renewed love for Leonor. She leaves and returns dressed as a lady, explaining her actions throughout the play. Repentant and humbled by Leonor's masterful execution of her plan, Juan promises to truly marry her this time. The abandoned Estela forgives Leonor and, calling her "sister," proposes to Fernando.

Ana Caro Mallén (ca. 1601 - ca. 1645)

Born into slavery and subsequently adopted by an officer of the High Court of Justice of Granada, Ana Caro spent much of her time in Seville and Madrid. Records of contemporary praise for Caro abound, with her talent celebrated in print by eminent playwrights and novelists of her day. Surprisingly, though, only two of her plays survive: a chivalric story entitled *El conde Partinuplés* and *Valor, agravio y mujer*. Besides her celebrity among contemporaries and her role as a professional writer, little was known about Caro's background until recently. The finding of a document concerning her birth in Granada makes Caro all the more intriguing, as a female dramatist who brings to the fore issues of social justice.

Characters

Doña Leonor

The protagonist of the play. Strong-willed, capable, and more than a little ruthless, she outwits the whole cast in a quest to restore her honor.

Ribete

Leonor's servant and confidant. He is the play's *gracioso*, or comedic servant, characterized by witty insights and criticism.

Don Juan

A globetrotting seducer who promises to marry Leonor but abandons her as soon as he grows bored with her. He spends the play in the court at Brussels, unsuccessfully wooing Estela and weathering the wrath of a disguised Leonor.

Tomillo

Don Juan's servant and another classic example of the *gracioso*—funny for his insights as well as his foolishness.

Fernando

Leonor's brother, who has lived abroad for most of her life and therefore does not know her. He is secretly in love with Estela.

Prince Ludovico

Prince of Pinoy (d'Épinoy), who, despite his high rank, is not much of an authority figure. He is in love with Estela and continues to pursue her undeterred by her repeated rejections.

Countess Estela

The Countess of Sora and the object of much unrequited passion. She rejects both Prince Ludovico and Don Juan but falls in love with Leonor in her disguise as Leonardo.

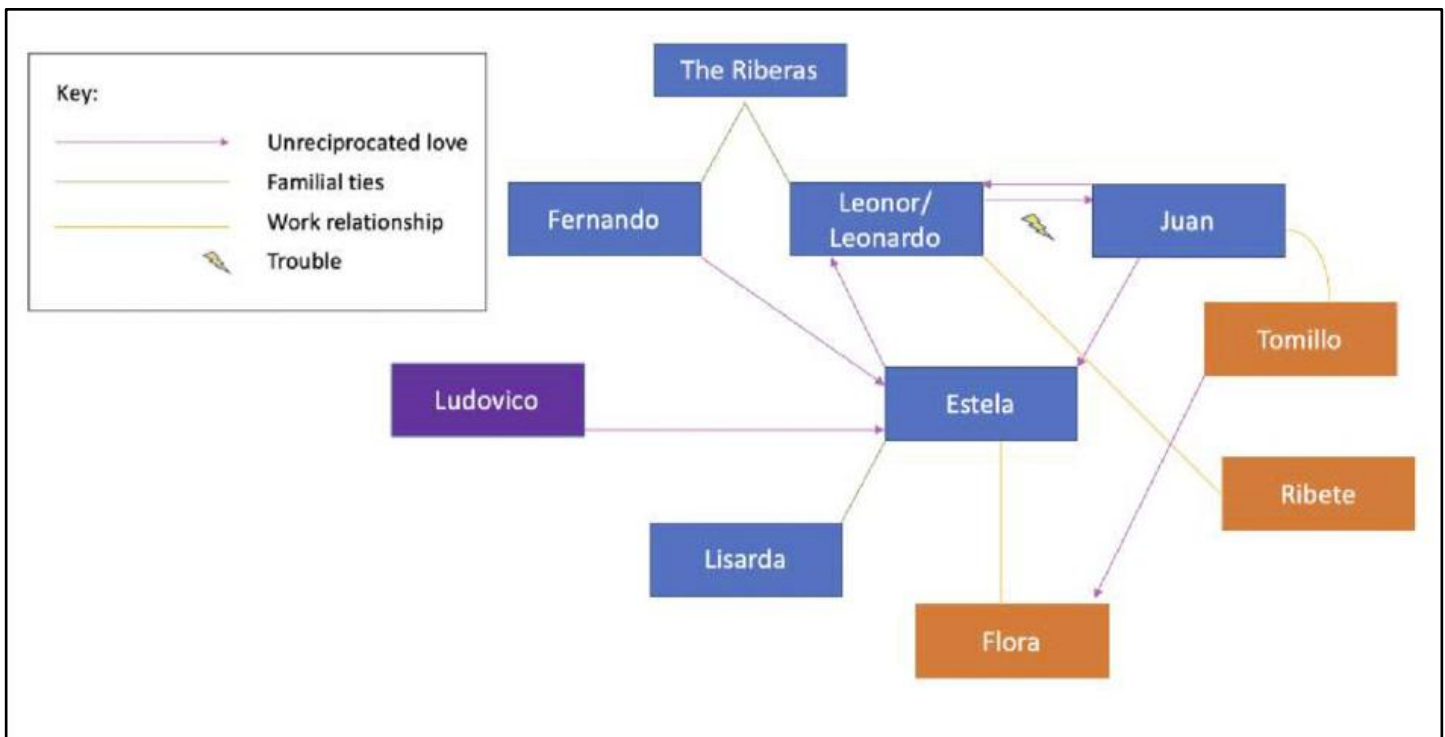
Lisarda

Estela's cousin, mild-mannered and unassuming.

Flora

Estela's servant, a bit of a trickster.

Map of Character Relations



Contexts

The Comedia Form

The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Though the form was influenced by Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the expansive corpus of the Spanish *comedia* includes not only comic plays, but also histories, tragedies, and tragicomedies. Roughly three thousand lines, they are usually divided into three different *jornadas*, or acts. They are written in verse, and employ different forms for different characters and situations. Hugely popular in their time, over ten thousand plays survive today.

Urban Space

The *comedias* often envision the social ambitions and conflicts of the rapidly-growing cities where they were performed, allowing a community to simultaneously witness and create a collective culture. In many of the plays, the anonymity and wealth that the city affords allow the clever to transcend their social positions, while wit, rather than force, frequently carries the day, creating an urban theater that itself performs urbanity.

Social Structures and the Comedia

The *comedia* often examines social hierarchies that may be less rigid than they first appear. Whether the dominant mode of the play is comic, tragic, historical, or a mixture, its dramatic progression often depends on a balancing act of order and liberty, authority and transgression, stasis and transformation. Individuals disadvantaged by class or gender often challenge the social hierarchy and patriarchy by way of their own cleverness. The *gracioso* (comic sidekick), the *barba* (older male blocking figure), and the lovers appear repeatedly in these plays, and yet are often much more than stock types. At their most remarkable, they reflect larger cultural possibilities. The *comedia* stages the conflicting demands of desire and reputation, dramatizing the tension between our identities as they are and as we wish them to be.

Female Roles

Female desire and agency are central to the *comedia*. In contrast to its English counterpart, the Spanish stage permitted actresses to play female roles, thus giving playwrights the opportunity to develop a variety of characters for them. While actresses became famous, the powerful roles they play onstage often portrayed the force of female desire.

The Comedia Stage

The *comedia* was performed in rectangular courtyard spaces known as *corrales*. Built between houses of two or three stories, the *corral* offered seating based on social position. A performance would have included the play as well as songs, dances, and *entremeses*, or short comic interludes, before, after, and between the acts.

Plots move quickly across time and space, without much regard for the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place. Such quick spatio-temporal movements are facilitated by the bare stage of the *comedia*, mostly stripped of props or scenery. Changes in location or time are often indicated by verbal references, and characters sometimes go into extended descriptions to paint the scene for the audience. Scene changes can also be indicated by costumes, such as the *capa y espada* (“cloak and sword”) used to indicate a character is outdoors or possibly that the scene is set at night. All the while, the stage remains essentially the same with the play relying extensively on the imagination of the audience.

Corral de comedias in the city of Almagro. Built in 1628, it is the only open-air Baroque theater that remains active.



Themes

Cross-Dressing and Gender

When Leonor dons breeches to avenge Don Juan's affront, she insists that she is not merely dressing up as a man. Instead, something much more profound has taken place: a transformation of her inner self. For seventeenth-century audiences, this was in fact a plausible occurrence. The early modern period conceived of sex and gender in fluid rather than binary terms that left open the possibility of transformation. This meant that each individual could be a woman or a man, depending on which sex prevailed in him or her at any particular time. Changes in bodily temperature, great effort or pain, and other accidents might turn a woman into a man.

The Don Juan Myth

First popularized in folktales, the mythical Don Juan had become a familiar feature of the *comedia* stage by the time Ana Caro was writing for the theater. The Don Juan of popular lore is a young nobleman who enjoys conquering women through ruses of all sorts. He does not hesitate to impersonate someone else, to kill, or to make false promises of marriage in order to enjoy the women he desires. Don Juan always grows tired of his conquests and subsequently abandons them, neither experiencing remorse nor fearing any consequences. Ana Caro re-elaborates the Don Juan myth through Leonor's unfaithful and inconstant lover, Don Juan de Córdoba. Like his predecessors, he comes from a noble family and is a flatterer and an unfaithful narcissist. Unlike the myth, however, Caro's Don Juan is tormented by doubt and fear.

Female Solidarity

Courage offers a striking counterpoint to the homosocial bonds among men that were common in contemporary plays. Leonor is consistently aware of commitment women owe to each other. She and her sister devise a plot to hide her absence from her family. In Brussels, she is highly conscious of the possible harm she might be bringing other women as she proceeds with her plot to deceive

Estela in order take revenge on Don Juan. At the same time, the play displays an acute awareness of how hard it was for women writers to gain recognition, as evident in the metatheatrical exchange between Ribete and Tomillo, when the latter complains about female poets in Madrid.

Female Sovereignty and Brussels

That Caro decided on the court in Brussels as the backdrop to her forceful vision of female agency may at first strike one as an odd, even arbitrary, choice. After all, the Flemish city was just one point in a vast political system whose center lay in Madrid. However, when it came to female, personal rule, the court in Brussels was exceptional. From 1621 until 1633, Phillip II's eldest daughter, the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, was the sole ruler of the Spanish Netherlands.

Staging Opportunities & Challenges

Act I—Storm Scene

The play's opening scene on the mountain with an approaching storm is, at first glance, difficult to reconcile with the rest of the story. Alone and lost after being separated from the rest of their hunting party, Estela and Lisarda find themselves in a terrifying situation, attacked by bandits until Don Juan and Tomillo show up out of nowhere to defend them. The play then suddenly moves to the court in Brussels. It is a strange scene that has even led some directors to cut it from their productions. However, this particular moment makes concrete important themes of the play. The experiences of Estela and Lisarda on that mountain are completely at odds with those of the men. Whereas the men can freely make their way through the wilderness, the women are vulnerable to attack. The scene suggests an acute awareness of the asymmetrical experiences of men and women in a patriarchal society obsessed with honor.

While Don Juan can move on to the seduction of another woman without fearing the consequences of his actions, Leonor faces irreparable damage to her social standing.

The Two Graciosos

The *gracioso* is a key figure of the Spanish *comedia* who is a comedic lower-class character in the service of a nobleman. He often plays the fool, but he is also savvy and witty with an ironic humor. Unrestricted by codes of conduct, the *gracioso* is free to speak truth to power. In *Courage* there are two *graciosos*: Leonor's servant Ribete and Don Juan's servant Tomillo. Though they share many similarities, they could not be further apart. Ribete shares in both Leonor's heroism and her transgressions, while Tomillo presents on a lesser scale the faults of Don Juan. The double comparison between *graciosos* and their masters and between the two *graciosos* offers rich possibilities for exploring the social mores of the play.

Performance History

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| 2006 | Production directed by Hugo Medrano for the Gala Hispanic Theater in Washington, D.C. Set in the nineteenth century. |
| 2017-19 | Production directed by Leyma López for Repertorio Español in New York City. |
| 2018 | Adaptation by Ana Castrojuan, entitled <i>Loco desatino</i> , at Teatro Gayarre in Pamplona Spain. |
| 2019 | Production directed by Verónica Clausich for the 42nd edition of the Festival de Almagro, Spain. |

Pronunciation Guide

Each vowel in Spanish has just one sound. They are pronounced as follows:

a - AH e - EH i - EE o - OH u - OO

The underlined syllable in each word is the accented one.

ñ - pronounced like the gn in lasagna

People

Doña Leonor: DOH-GNAH LEH-OH-NOHR

Leonardo: LEH-OH-NAHR-DOH

Ribete: REE-BEH-TEH

Don Juan: DON HWAHN

Tomillo: TOH-MEE-YOH

Don Fernando: DON FEHR-NAHN-DOH

Ludovico: LOO-DOH-BEE-COH

Estela: EHS-TEH-LAH

Doña Lisarda: DOH-GNAH LEE-SAHR-DAH

Flora: FLOH-RAH

Fineo: FEE-NEH-OH

Tibaldo: TEE-BAHL-DOH

Rufino: ROO-FEE-NOH

Astolfo: AHS-TOHL-FOH

Godofre: GOH-DOH-FREH

Sancho: SAHN-CHOH

Don Quijote: DOHN KEE-HOH-TEH

Juan de Mena: HWAHN DEH MEH-NAH

Enrique de Villena: EHN-REE-KEH DE BEE-

YEH-NAH

Góngora: GOHN-GOH-RAH

Ribera: REE-BEH-RAH

Fisberto: FEES-BEHR-TOH

Lucindo: LOO-CEEN-DOH

Liseno: LEE-SEHN-OH

Infanta: EEN-FAHN-TAH

Anarda: AH-NAHR-DAH

Ricardo: REE-CAHR-DOH

Luis de Narváez: LOOEES DE NAHR-BAH-EHS

Places

Belflor: BEHL-FLOHR

Córdoba: COHR-DOH-BAH

Andalucía: AHN-DAH-LOO-CEE-AH

Sora: SOH-RAH

Sevilla: SEH-BEE-YAH

Objects

Escudos: EHS-COO-DOHS

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