

# DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS

## *The Force of Habit* Dramaturgy Packet

*The Force of Habit (La fuerza de la costumbre)*  
by Guillén de Castro y Bellvís

Dramaturgy packet compiled by Rhonda Sharrah

Based on the translation by  
The UCLA Working Group on the *Comedia* in Translation and Performance  
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# The Force of Habit

A play by Guillén de Castro  
y Bellvís

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Guillén de Castro's *The Force of Habit* is a play that asks: Can gender be learned and unlearned? Félix and Hipólita, two siblings separated at birth, are brought up in the habits of the opposite gender. Kept close by his mother's side, Félix is cautious and sensitive. Hipólita, trained by her father on the battlefield, is fiercely attached to her sword. When the family is reunited, the father insists on making the siblings conform

to traditional gender roles, but they discover old habits die hard. Will a change of clothes make the man—and woman? Could a change of heart help them along? As habit clashes with tradition, desire conquers all in this fast-paced comedy of identity that explores the limitations of rigid gender roles in one unconventional 17<sup>th</sup>-century family.

**Synopsis** Twenty years before the action of the play begins, Pedro and Costanza began a secret affair, eventually discovered by Costanza's brother, who challenged Pedro to a fight. After Pedro tragically killed her brother, he left Costanza pregnant with a son, Félix, while he fled with their daughter, Hipólita. Costanza kept Félix sheltered by her side while Pedro raised Hipólita as a soldier (and a man) on the battlefields of Flanders.

*Act I* The play opens with Pedro finally returning home. The parents are chagrined to realize that they have each raised their children in the habits of the opposite gender. Both siblings resist being forced to change their ways, but when they meet Luis and his sister, Leonor, they are each instantly smitten. The parents hope that love will be the motivation to change their children.

*Act II* The siblings' struggles with their "natural" gender roles anger their father. When Otavio and Marcelo cause trouble trying to woo Leonor and Hipólita, Félix ends up humiliated by Otavio, and Hipólita gets into a physical fight with Galván, the family servant. Félix swears to restore his honor, Galván vows revenge against Hipólita for humiliating him, and Hipólita's feelings for Luis make her feel newly vulnerable.

### Act III

As payback, Galván tricks Hipólita into a fit of jealousy over Luis. When she challenges Luis to a duel, they instead engage in an ambiguous physical struggle that turns sexual, leaving Hipólita confused and distraught, but surrendered to love. Meanwhile, Félix defeats Otavio in a duel and finally becomes “manly” in the eyes of his society. The play ends with the siblings conforming to the expectations of their genders, and both engaged to marry, but with a lingering sense of loss for Hipólita.

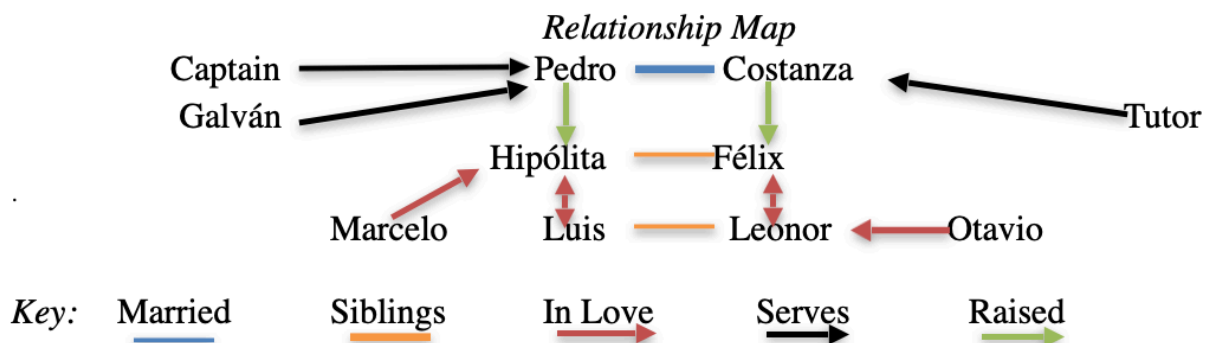
## Guillén de Castro y Bellvís (1569–1631)

From a young age, the nobleman Guillén de Castro was highly involved with the literary world of his native Valencia, an influential Mediterranean trading city in Spain. After a period of military service in Italy, Castro moved to Madrid, where he befriended the famous playwright Lope de Vega. Castro remained active in literary circles in Madrid until his death in 1631.

Castro’s plays range from the mythological to the urban. He was not afraid to tackle controversial subjects on stage, including regicide, bigamy, and sexuality. His works explore the formation of identity, power and authority, and the troubled domestic relationships of husbands and wives. His skill in adapting popular stories, such as the medieval ballads on El Cid or the exploits of Don Quijote, and his unflinching presentation of urban life make him one of the most interesting playwrights of Spanish *comedia*.



## Characters



COSTANZA	Mother of Félix and Hipólita, wife of Pedro. Always afraid for her son, loyal to her husband. Bold in love when young, but scarred by the tragedy it caused.
PEDRO	Father of Félix and Hipólita, husband to Costanza. A soldier who believes in strength and authority. Cares for his children, but obsessed with reputation.
HIPÓLITA	Daughter of Costanza and Pedro, sister to Félix. Raised on the battlefield by her father and trained in arms. Shares a name with an Amazonian queen who in some versions of the Greek myth is defeated by Theseus in combat and then married him.
FÉLIX	Son of Costanza and Pedro, brother to Hipólita. Wants to please his parents, but unused to the demands of the masculine honor code.
LUIS	Brother to Leonor, in love with Hipólita. Can be hotheaded, but also adept at social graces. Happy to help Pedro train Félix in the ways of men.
LEONOR	Sister to Luis, in love with Félix. Friendly with Hipólita. Knows what she wants and is willing to demand it. Not above a little scheming to get her way.
OTAVIO	Friend to Marcelo, in love with Leonor. Disdainful and insulting to Félix.
MARCELO	Friend to Otavio, in love with Hipólita. Jealous of Luis. Somewhat devious.
GALVÁN	Pedro's servant. A wisecracking observer of the family's antics.



## TUTOR

Costanza's servant. Loyal to the family, he helped raise Félix. Has strong opinions about Costanza's mothering. Could be doubled with the Constable or Bailiff.

## CAPTAIN

Watches over Félix for Pedro. Could be doubled with the Master of Arms.

## Contexts

### *The Comedia Form*

The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though influenced by Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the Spanish *comedia* includes not only comic plays, but also histories, tragedies, and tragicomedies. Roughly three thousand lines, they are usually divided into three *jornadas*, or acts. Plots move quickly across time and space, without much regard for the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place. The plays are written in verse, and employ different forms for different characters and situations. Hugely popular in their time, over ten thousand plays survive today.

### *Original Performance Conditions*

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.

## *Theatrical Cross-Dressing*

While cross-dressing plots were common in the *comedia*, Félix and Hipólita are unconventional even within that tradition. The successful cross-dressers in most plays normally do so for a short time and with a specific goal in mind, and then easily return to their normal clothing, names, and behavior once the job is done. In *The Force of Habit*, the siblings arrive onstage at ease in the expected dress and manners of the gender opposite their biological sex, and their struggle to conform to their parents' demands is long, difficult, and painful.

## **Themes**

*The Force of Habit* raises complex questions about the importance of nature vs. nurture and the power of habit to shape identity. As we watch the siblings comically fail to perform their “natural” roles — wearing high-heeled shoes or wielding a sword — we are encouraged to look around at other characters and evaluate the relative success or failure of their various performances. When Don Pedro rages at his son and attacks him, he may be performing a certain kind of masculinity, while also failing to perform as a father should. Once something as seemingly basic as gender enters a state of flux, identity categories of all kinds come unmoored and reduced to mere custom. Otavio and Luis agree that nurture seems to come out ahead:

LUIS	That's how strong habit becomes after a long time.
OTAVIO	It is powerfully strong! More than popes or kings— beyond laws human or divine! Its force is beyond words.

## Staging Challenges & Opportunities

### *Act 1, Scene 2 – Hipólita's Gender Identity*

In her first appearance, Hipólita's gendered performance appears to be more internalized and complete than that of Félix—even her parents initially refer to her as a young man, as opposed to a woman with masculine qualities—and her physical, psychological, and emotional suffering as a result of the switch is more severe. Productions will have to decide how to portray this journey in light of the complicated questions raised about “her” real gender identity, which may be interpreted as trans.

### *Act 3, Scenes 6-8 – Masculinity and Violence*

Throughout the play, Félix's father and the other men both threaten him with violence and encourage him to become more violent in order to prove he is a man. At the same time, the culmination of Hipólita's transformation comes after an ambiguous offstage encounter, quite possibly violent, with the man she loves. This scene is complicated in that Hipólita relates it to her mother after the fact: did Hipólita willingly allow herself to be overpowered, was the sexual act entirely nonconsensual, or was it something in between? In the play, does masculinity equate with violent dominance and femininity with submission, and does the play itself align with that view or hold it up for critique?

### *Act 3, Scene 9 – (Un)happy Ending*

After three acts that brazenly challenge traditional presentations of gender, modern audiences may be surprised when the play ends with heterosexual marriage allegedly curing the siblings of their gender-bending ills. As in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* or *Taming of the Shrew*, what should be a traditional comic ending is complicated by the reimposition of gender hierarchies that modern audiences find problematic. Directors might choose to bring out the rich complications of play in a variety of ways: instead of simply portraying the siblings as fully happy with their decisions



to enter new phases of their lives with the ones they love, they might highlight their dissatisfaction and sense of loss, or emphasize how different the stakes are for someone taking on masculinity versus femininity. The 2017 staged reading at Cal Poly Pomona, for example, interpreted the siblings' transformation as growth into adult responsibility, with Félix demonstrating his own version of empathetic manhood when he regains his honor but chooses to spare Otavio's life, and Hipólita learning to temper her tendency toward impulsive violence as she newly experiences love and sexual desire.

## Production History

The date of first performance is unknown; the play was first published in 1625 in Castro's second volume of collected plays. It later became a likely source for Massinger, Fletcher, and Beaumont's *Love's Cure, or The Martial Maid*, which follows the plot of the siblings raised in their opposite gender, but more strongly condemns the male characters and allows the daughter to retain some of her gender flexibility at the end.

An adaptation of Kathleen Jeffs's English translation for the stage was performed under her direction at Gonzaga University in 2013, and also at University of Puget Sound in 2015 and Lewis-Clark State College in 2018.

UCLA's Diversifying the Classics translation was performed by Chalk Repertory Theatre as a staged reading in May 2014, and again in October 2017 at Cal Poly Pomona as part of the annual Southern California Shakespeare Festival.

## 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:

Don: Dohn	Doña: <u>Doh</u> -gna
Pedro de Moncada: <u>Peh</u> -droh deh Mohn- <u>cah</u> -dah	Costanza: Cohs- <u>tahn</u> -zah
Félix: <u>Feh</u> -leex	Hipólita: Ee- <u>poh</u> -lee-tah
Galván: Gahl- <u>vahn</u>	Luis: Loo- <u>ees</u>
Leonor: Leh-oh- <u>nohr</u>	Inés: Ee- <u>nehs</u>
Otavio: Oh- <u>tah</u> -vee-oh	Marcelo: Mahr- <u>seh</u> -loh
River Guerva: Goo- <u>ehr</u> -vah	Zaragoza: Sahr-ah- <u>goh</u> -sah
Santa Engracia: <u>Sahn</u> -tah Ehn- <u>grah</u> -see-ah	Valencia: Vah- <u>lehn</u> -see-ah
Martín Peláez: Mahr- <u>teehn</u> Peh-lah-ehs	Cid: Sihd

## Further Reading

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