

DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS

Unhappily Married in Valencia

Dramaturgy Packet

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Unhappily Married in Valencia

A play by Guillén de
Castro y Bellvís



Two married couples, Ipólita and Álvaro and Eugenia and Valerián, are disillusioned with their respective marriages and

look outside of their conjugal vows to try to realize their fantasies of a better match. Eugenia heats up the stage in her effort to seduce Álvaro, unaware that at the same time her husband Valerián is in pursuit of his friend's wife. Álvaro brings his mistress Elvira into the home he shares with his long-suffering—and to him insufferable—wife Ipólita. Innuendo, accusations, and revenge steal the show while the cross-dressed Elvira manipulates one and all.

Synopsis After meeting and wooing Elvira on a trip to Zaragoza, Álvaro convinces her that to continue their relationship she must disguise herself as a page and become a member of his household. Unbeknownst to Álvaro, his friend and neighbor Valerián has been trying unsuccessfully to seduce his wife Ipólita the whole time he's been gone. When Álvaro and Elvira—now Antonio—return to Valencia, the full dysfunction of these households is made clear: Valerián's wife Eugenia pines lustfully after Álvaro, and Ipólita has lost all trust in her philandering husband. As they endure social gatherings steeped in tension and barely restrained resentment, the couples quickly find their romantic stalemate disrupted by the presence of the manipulative Elvira. In between playing tricks on the other household staff, Galíndez and Pierres, she uses her increased mobility under the guise of the pageboy Antonio to stoke the flames of distrust and dissatisfaction among the couples. Everything comes to a head with a case of mistaken identity and a bed trick which ends in the dissolution of both marriages.

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 a range of topics from the formation of identity, power and authority, to 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

ÁLVARO

Husband of Ipólita, having an affair with Elvira. A charismatic charmer who does little to hide his disdain for his wife, and who feels he is the last honorable man left alive.

IPÓLITA

Wife of Álvaro. She has lost all trust in her husband and makes no secret of it. Accosted by Valerián and mercilessly teased by Eugenia, she finds comfort only in religion.

VALERIÁN

Husband of Eugenia. He doggedly pursues his friend's wife with no regard for propriety. He's so lovesick that he hardly seems to register his wife's resentment.

EUGENIA

Wife of Valerián. She nurses a barely restrained passion for Álvaro, and finds her husband sadly lacking in comparison. She is blunt to the point of being confrontational.

LEONARDO

Brother to Ipólita. Brought in to save his sister from violence, he proceeds tactfully and pragmatically to ensure that she, and by extension he, remains blameless in the affair.

ELVIRA

Mistress to Álvaro. Although seemingly swept up in her infatuation to Álvaro, she also has a vindictive streak and proceeds to manipulate everyone to make them equally miserable.

GALÍNDEZ

Squire to Don Álvaro. A loyal servant, his old-fashioned, stuffy nature contrasts with an almost lecherous interest in women which Elvira is able to exploit.

PIERRES

Servant to Valerián. Described by others as a fool and a drunk, he cheerfully makes the best of his life of servitude. He's suggestible to the point of being gullible, a trait which makes him easy to manipulate.

Contexts

The Comedia Form

The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16th and early 17th 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* (see image below). 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.



Early Modern Marriage Laws

The dissolution of the marriages in the final scene is a unique element of this play, and stands in contrast to the more conventional endings of the *comedia*, where plots are often instead resolved with marriage. It is important to note that these dissolutions cannot rightly be called divorce, since divorce as such did not exist in seventeenth-century Spain (it only became legal there in 1981). The only way out of marriage which was sanctioned by the Catholic church was for couples to be granted an annulment or, of course, for one of the spouses to die. The dissolution of marriages in this play draws from very real legal decisions about what constituted grounds for annulment:

[C]ases of annulment of marriage were also very exceptional and were related to the husband's impotence or "the wife's extreme reticence," which prevented consummation, the young age of the spouses, clandestine marriages or enforced marriages following abduction, consanguinity, the solemn vow [to enter religious life] of one of the spouses, bigamy, or the murder of the previous spouse in order to be able to remarry. (Sperling 67-108)



The laws against consanguinity, that is, marriage to a cousin within a certain degree of closeness, could be bypassed by asking special permission

from the Pope, and required a trip to Rome to acquire a properly notarized dispensation. Leonardo exploits the law against consanguineous marriage by stating that the papal dispensation required for Álvaro and Ipólita's marriage was never properly notarized, thereby nullifying the entire thing. Meanwhile, Eugenia and Valerián's marriage is nullified through the very specific annulment law which declared that in the case of the murder of one spouse for the purposes of marriage to another, the second marriage would be null and void.

Themes

Claustrophobic domestic life

Toxic relationships

Friendship

Marriage

Consuming passions (hatred, lust, desire, piety)

Corrosive nature of secrets

Challenges & Opportunities

Asides and Duologues

In early modern Spanish theater, asides are an important theatrical practice: they add psychological depth, playfully engage the audience, and offer social commentary about the events of the play as they unfold. These moments give us insight

into past hurts or current jealousies, and provide motivation for how the characters react; emotions like joy, dismay, or anger are often solely expressed through asides. Another technique employed by Castro is the staging of juxtaposed duologues, where pairs of characters hold entirely separate, although parallel, conversations on different parts of the stage. In Act I, Sc. 3 for example, the characters are coupled according to desired relationships, each having an independent exchange of seduction and refusal, oblivious of the other couple:

IPÓLITA	Stop, on your life.
VALERIÁN	My love will not allow me.
DON ÁLVARO	Let go.
EUGENIA	Wait.
DON ÁLVARO	Who says so?
VALERIÁN	I'm crazy for you.
DON ÁLVARO	You're not yourself.
IPÓLITA	If you insist, I will let the whole world know.
EUGENIA	My lord!
IPÓLITA	<i>(Aside)</i> Oh, heavens!

They all see each other (421–431)

We can imagine them on opposite ends of the stage, each one eyeing his or her respective spouse nervously as they all make their way toward center stage. Such scenes also increase the ambiguity: How much does each character know? How much do they suspect? While the audience ponders these questions, it becomes clear that the best informed, or at least the most vocal about her knowledge, is the mistress Elvira, as she stands as an observer.

*Act 1, Scene 4 —
The Alphabet Game*

The game which takes up the latter half of Act 1 provides insight into the domestic life of the urban nobility, whose economic privilege allowed for leisure time, and when parlor games make their way into *comedia*, they are used as a way to move the plot forward or give context to relationships between characters. In *Unhappily Married*, the storytelling game becomes an opportunity for the characters to voice their true desires or concerns. This scene is a wonderful opportunity to really dig into the marital relationships of the characters, and to see how they function—or why they don't. The game consists of choosing a letter of the alphabet and then crafting a story based around that letter; if a mistake is made, the players must pay a forfeit. The forfeits played in the scene also reflect a character's actual missteps in their marriage, i.e. Álvaro's mistakes are caught by his wife, and he must pay multiple forfeits, which indicate multiple past indiscretions.

*Act 2, Scene 7 —
Preshow entremés*

Preshow entremés: This scene has its roots in traditional Valencian theater, similar to the set pieces from *commedia dell'arte* and the later *entremeses* played between acts of long-form theater. The characters are metatheatrically recast in this moment as stock archetypes of traditional theater: the foreign fool (Pierres), the crotchety old man (Galíndez), the passionate woman (Eugenia), the effeminate, cowardly husband (Valerián), and the womanizer (Álvaro). While the amused reaction of the characters to the cruel trick may strike us as callous, in the context of *comedia* the *entremés* exists as a no-holds-barred moment that is meant to take the audience, momentarily, out of the action, suspending the higher-stakes narrative of the *comedia*. This scene provides an excellent opportunity for the modern director to bracket the scene with a different acting style, a sketch comedy routine, or even a bit of improv, in the same spirit of the seventeenth-century *entremés*.

*Act 3, Scene 1 —
The Last Straw*

This scene is challenging for multiple reasons: it's metatheatrical, it's a major turning point for Ipólita, and it deals in taboo subject matter for the period. While the reactions of Galíndez and Ipólita to seeing what they think is a homosexual encounter are distasteful, to say the least, they exist well within the realm of expectation for these characters, both of whom are highly religious. Ipólita's reaction in particular is crucial to the scene: religion has been both the reason she must stay married and how she has sought comfort, and it may now be providing the ultimate excuse for her escape. The metatheatricality of the scene—Galíndez watches his master and believes he has discovered a truth, while the audience watches all and *knows* the truth—also provides a number of opportunities for innovative staging.

Pierres

A character of uncertain origin who speaks an idiosyncratic amalgamation of romance languages in the original text—Spanish, Catalan, and Occitan, now spoken in southern France—has been translated to speak combination of English, Spanish, Catalan, and French. He is referred to by the other characters as a *gabacho*, a term which might be familiar to a modern-day audience of Spanish speakers as a somewhat derogatory term for people who speak Spanish poorly. This, as it turns out, is not too dissimilar from its seventeenth-century usage, when it was used to describe people who left the lower Pyrenees and moved south into Spain in search of work. The prevailing stereotype of *gabachos* was that they were willing to do the most menial and degrading tasks to earn money before returning home.

The Letters, Acts 2 & 3

Keeping track of the many love letters sent in the second and third acts can be confusing, but they are also crucial to Elvira's manipulation of the other characters, and to creating the chaos of the last scene of the play. Because every character besides Álvaro believes that Elvira is a page named Antonio, she is able to gain, and keep, their trust even when they catch her in a lie. A strong

visual differentiation of the letters may aid the audience in keeping track of which letter was written by which character, and for whom it was written. The handwriting on the letters is also indicated as being wildly different depending on the author.

Unsympathetic Characters

All the characters, down to the servants, have moments where they engage in ugly, cruel, or vindictive actions towards the other characters. Álvaro in particular is very easy to hate, as he sweet-talks both his wife and mistress with what seem to be empty words, and yet also tries to claim a moral high ground when he discovers Valerián has been trying to seduce his wife. Even a character like Ipólita, whose suffering we understand as a result of repeated mistreatment by her husband, is hard to sympathize with since she exists in a near constant state of passive aggression. Any production of *Unhappily Married* must keep in mind two things: at some point in their past, these couples felt a genuine attraction/love for each other (eroded as it might be by the play's opening); the play leans into an examination of toxic domesticity, heightened by the claustrophobia of knowing there is no way out of these relationships. While the characters in *Unhappily Married* are not exactly likable, they are profoundly relatable.

Production History

An adaption of the play, written by Luciano García Lorenzo, toured in Spain in 1994 and again in 2013. More recently, in 2014, Los Angeles playwright Laurel Ollstein wrote a modernized English adaptation also entitled *Unhappily Married in Valencia*, enjoying a series of readings in Los Angeles and Boston. Condensed to one hour, Ollstein's adaptation moves the action to Valencia, California, a neighborhood in Santa Clarita; in this context, Valencia provides a contemporary suburban setting where isolated couples look for love in all the wrong places. Ollstein's main twist is Elvira's character—not a cross-dressed woman but a gay man who returns from a poetry conference with Alvy (Álvaro). Despite gender changes and an abbreviated plot, Ollstein conveys the enduring themes from Castro's play, bringing modern audiences closer to Spain's classical theater and illuminating human experiences that have not changed much between then and now.

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

Don Álvaro: DON AHL-VAH-ROH

Ipólita: EE-POH-LEE-TAH

Valerián: VAH-LEH-REEAN

Eugenia: EH-OO-HEH-NEEAH

Antonio: AHN-TOH-NEE-OH

Leonardo: LEH-O-NAR-DOH

Elvira: EHL-VEE-RAH

Galíndez: GAH-LEEN-DEHS

Pierres: PEE-EHR (as in the French, "Pierre")

Two Gabachos: GAH-BAH-CHOHS

Further Reading

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