

STUDY GUIDE TO ANA CARO'S *VALOR, AGRAVIO Y MUJER.*

Diversifying the Classics

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1. Women in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Theater: Writers, Actresses, and Spectators.

a. The Author: Who Was Ana Caro?

We knew almost nothing about the author of *Valor, agravio y mujer*, Ana Caro Mallén, until the recent find of a document concerning her baptism in 1601, which claims that she was born a slave in Granada and was subsequently adopted by a high officer of the High Court of Justice of Granada (Real Audiencia y Chancillería). Caro spent much time in Seville and Madrid, the two most important cities of early modern Spain, where literature and theater thrived. For several years, Ana Caro was able to make a living thanks to her work as a playwright for Spain's public playhouses. Unfortunately, only two of her plays have survived: a chivalric story entitled *El conde Partinuplés* and *Valor*, which one might translate as *The courage to right a woman wronged*.

Yet this is at odds with the praise that her contemporaries lavished upon her. Caro was intriguingly included in a book celebrating Famous Men of Seville and her talent was celebrated in print by eminent playwrights and novelists of her day, such as Antonio de Castillo Solórzano and Luis Vélez de Guevara. Caro was connected with key intellectual networks in seventeenth-century Madrid. She was friends with the famous novelist María de Zayas, who wrote that "audiences have praised [Caro], and every great mind has crowned her with laurel and cries of victory, writing her name on the city streets."

b. A Society of Theatergoers

For seventeenth-century women and men of every social class, leisure time often meant going to the theater. Contemporary playwright Juan de Zabaleta depicted spectators rushing over lunch and even skipping meals as they hastened to the public playhouse to get the best seats. The show would last until sunset and sometimes even later. Guitar music, fashionable dance, and brief comic interludes or *entremeses* punctuated the performance of the play or *comedia*, the main event in the afternoon. A theatergoer attending the three acts of *Valor, agravio y mujer* would also see a variety of spectacles, alternating between the comic and the serious.

Large cities boasted several theater houses, but even small towns across Spain's global empire often had at least one theater. Theater was performed in open-air *corrales de comedias* in which spectators of every social class and gender gathered to watch the same spectacle in a proximity that only a few public spaces could afford (going to church and taking part in popular festivities were other examples). Theater was thus a unique experience, with individuals from very different backgrounds encountering the same jokes and episodes on the stage. We can only imagine how they might have

variously identified with or laughed at various moments. Playhouses possessed what at least in theory were well-delimited areas for different social groups: while noblemen and noblewomen could share a box or aposento, lower-class male spectators stood downstairs in the patio, carefully separated from lower-class women, who sat in the balcony or cazuela. However, these precautions were never enough to prevent the encounters that the authorities tried so hard to discourage. To the chagrin of moralists and the delight of everyone else, theater remained a favorite venue for social exchange and experience. For the audience of the corral, watching each other was often as amusing as watching the play.

But theater's social function was not restricted to entertainment or shaping occasions for social gathering. It also provided funds for the management of hospitals, which were operated by religious confraternities that received part of the fee spectators paid to see their favorite actors and actresses on stage. This system allowed public theaters to remain in continuous operation, with only brief interruptions for periods of royal mourning and other exceptional instances.

c. A Commercial Theater: The Birth of Fandom and Stardom

Women performed in public theaters in seventeenth-century Spain. Given complex and charismatic roles like that of Leonor, the protagonist in *Valor, agravio y mujer*, actresses sometimes became true celebrities. Poets and gazetteers of the day recorded how audience members even engaged in brawls over who was the best actress. Audience preferences made talented actors and actresses famous, placing individuals who otherwise lacked any markers of social distinction in the public eye. Strikingly for us today, records show that in seventeenth-century Spain actresses, the real stars of the stage, were often paid more than their male counterparts.

This contrasts markedly with contemporary Elizabethan and Jacobean England, where women were forbidden on the public stage, so that cross-dressed male actors had to perform the female characters in all of Shakespeare's plays. In Spain, playwrights found good reason to create important female roles and often made women their protagonists, granting them as many lines as men spoke. Playwrights often wrote a role with a famous actress in mind.

Seventeenth-century Spanish actresses often took matters into their own hands, and showed great solidarity with other women. When the authorities tried (and failed) to prohibit actresses from performing in public, a group of fourteen of them, led by famous performers Mariana Vaca and María de la O, addressed a petition to the Council of Castile, arguing that keeping actresses from the corrales de comedias was not only hurting them financially, but also affecting the entire theater industry. In fact, a public officer in the city of Madrid lamented that, with theaters empty because no

actresses were on the stage, public hospitals faced a dire financial situation. Women were clearly organized and ready to claim their rights.

Women contributed to the creation of a national commercial theater in Spain even beyond acting and writing plays. Within a theatrical troupe they could rise to become directors and producers (or “autoras”, as they were called at the time). At the same time, women married to printers often worked alongside their husbands and led the businesses when they were widowed. The prominence of widows-printers in seventeenth-century Spain is remarkable: for example, a widow by the name of Francisca de Medina was responsible for publishing many volumes of the plays of Lope de Vega, Spain’s most famous playwright at the time.

2. Valor, agravio y mujer

a. Plot

The play tells the story of a Leonor, a lady from Seville who, dressed as a man (Leonardo), follows the fellow who betrayed her (don Juan) all the way to Flanders. Don Juan now lives with Leonor’s brother (don Fernando) and seeks once again to seduce a young lady of high standing (Countess Estela). What follows is a great deal of trickery, confusion, and cross-dressing, as Leonor strives to set her life aright.

Act I: The play opens with Estela and Lisarda, separated from their hunting party, descending a mountain during a storm only to be set upon by bandits. They are saved by Don Juan de Córdoba and his servant, Tomillo, who happen to be in the area, and are reunited with Don Fernando de Ribera and Prince Ludovico. Juan is invited to join the group at the court in Brussels but lingers behind a moment to tell Fernando how he came to be in Flanders. He reveals that he had fallen in love with a lady in Seville and courted her successfully with pledges of marriage, only to grow tired of her and desert her. As Fernando and Juan depart, Leonor – the very woman Juan abandoned, and Fernando’s sister – enters the stage disguised as a man along with her servant Ribete. She describes how she followed Juan to Flanders seeking to restore her lost honor, which she could only accomplish in male guise. She meets Fernando, who fails to recognize his sister, and convinces him that she is his cousin, Don Leonardo Ponce de León. Fernando invites her to stay in Brussels.

Act II: Estela confides in Lisarda about the state of her love life. While both Juan and Ludovico court her, she cares for neither; instead, she has fallen in love with Leonardo. Leonor, as Leonardo, has set out to seduce Estela in order to thwart Juan’s romantic overtures. S/he plans to force Juan to publicly confess his wrongdoing and agree to a duel, so that Leonor can restore her own honor by killing him. Estela plans to meet “Leonardo” that night on the palace grounds. Leonor informs Ludovico of the meeting and offers to give up Estela, if only he will impersonate Leonardo that night to convince her that she in fact prefers the prince. Leonor, using Ribete as an intermediary, then

convinces Juan that Estela wants to meet him that night at her balcony. As Juan attempts to go to Estela, however, Leonor sets upon him in another male disguise, accuses him of dishonorable conduct and challenges him to a duel, at least in part to waylay him long enough to prevent him interrupting Ludovico's meeting with Estela. Leonor leaves a confused Juan to disguise herself as Estela and meet him at Estela's balcony. There she rejects him and criticizes his conduct in Seville in such detail that he is left defensive and astonished, forced to review his old feelings for Leonor while convinced that someone has betrayed his confidence by revealing so much to Estela. In the meantime, Ludovico-as-Leonardo is unable to convince Estela of Ludovico's appeal.

Act III: Juan accuses Fernando of telling Estela what happened in Seville. Fernando rightly denies the accusation. Juan proceeds to ask Estela herself about the identity of the informant. As no one had, in fact, told her anything, Juan's interrogation effectively serves as a confession of the entire affair. Estela rejects him for his old misconduct. Juan then approaches Leonor-as-Leonardo and asks him to give up his pursuit of Estela, to which Leonor responds that he (Leonardo) is actually in love with Leonor and has come to Brussels to avenge her honor. This prompts Juan to sudden and unexpected jealousy, and a declaration that it was he who betrayed Leonor. Fernando enters and interrupts their argument, lamenting his feelings for Estela. Meanwhile, Flora drugs Tomillo with a chocolate drink, rifles through his belongings, and steals his money. Juan, still madly jealous, returns to challenge Leonardo to a duel. Fernando catches them about to fight and prompts Juan to confess to dishonoring a lady in Seville and that the lady was Fernando's sister. Leonor-as-Leonardo pushes the argument to the point that Juan declares his renewed love for Leonor. She leaves and returns dressed as a lady, explaining her actions throughout the play. An impressed Juan promises to truly marry her this time. The abandoned Estela forgives Leonor and, calling her "sister," proposes to Fernando. Ludovico proposes to Lisarda. Estela matches Flora with Ribete. Tomillo remains alone and penniless.

b. Characters

Doña Leonor: The protagonist of the play. She leaves her native Seville for Brussels and disguises herself as a man (Leonardo Ponce de León) in an effort to avenge herself on her former lover, Don Juan de Córdoba, who breached his promise to marry her and fled the country. Strong-willed, capable, and more than a little ruthless, she deliberately deceives the whole cast (save Ribete) in a quest to restore her honor.

Ribete: Leonor's servant and confidant, who journeys to Flanders with her and helps her carry out her plans against Don Juan. He represents a version of the 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; a classic example of the gracioso, funny for his insights as well as his foolishness.

Don Fernando: Leonor’s brother, who has lived abroad for most of her life and therefore does not know her. Easy-going and slow to fight, he holds his peace with Don Juan for most of the play despite disagreeing with his ethical choices. He is secretly in love with Estela.

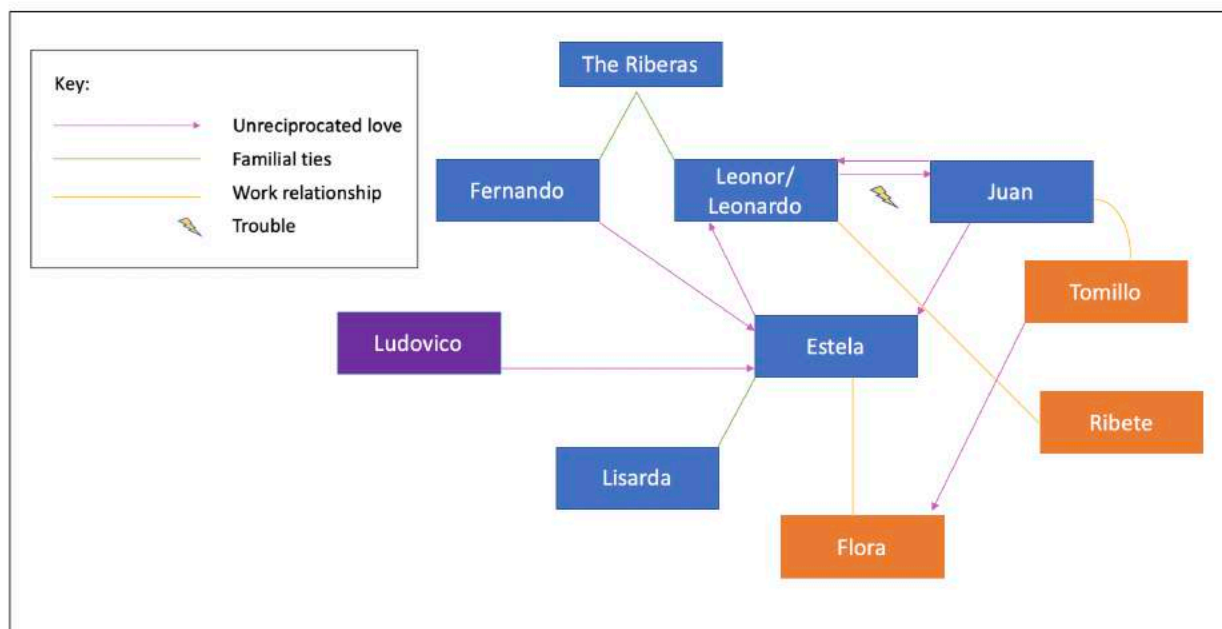
Prince Ludovico: Prince of Pinoy (d’Épinoy), who, despite his high rank, is not much of an authority figure. He is in love with Estela and continues to pursue her undeterred by her repeated rejections.

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.

Doña Lisarda: Estela’s cousin, mild-mannered and unassuming.

Flora: Estela’s servant, a bit of a trickster.

c. Map of relations among characters.



d. Cross-dressing and Sexual Ambiguity

“This attire will allow me to recover my lost honor” (vv. 464-65), exclaims Leonor. Women dressed as men were very popular devices in Golden Age “comedias”. Valor

explores what it means for a woman to join the ranks of men, while poking fun at that theatrical construction through the play's gracioso (Ribete)—a figure who often gets to speak truth to power. “You seem the God of Love. What a figure, leg, and foot!” (vv. 466-67), exclaims Ribete as he contemplates Leonor, now dressed as a man, in breeches and stockings, ready to avenge Don Juan's affront. As Ribete notes, typical male attire was considered scandalous on a woman, because it exposed the shape her body, especially her legs.

The exchange between Ribete and the cross-dressed Leonor must have riveted the different audiences at the corral. The mosqueteros standing at the pit would have enjoyed Ribete's explicit mention of the actress's tight clothes and sexy figure. The women in the stewpot or cazuela, meanwhile, would have enjoyed listening to the cross-dressed Leonor and envisioning for themselves a like transformation, with all the possibilities that it could entail, including an affront on male privilege in their society. The mere idea of such a transformation seems to have inspired historical women. Trial records and contemporary news items tell of many women who, inspired by the stories they watched at the corral, seem to have dressed as men to further engage in public life.

Although Leonor has changed her clothes, she insists that she is not just wearing a costume: “I am who I am! You are wrong if you think I am a woman, Ribete. The affront done to me has also transformed my inner self” (vv. 508-10). Leonor claims she is not merely dressing up so she can speak in the voice of a man. Instead, she insists she has brought about a profound transformation of her self. While we might find this a strange claim, it was plausible for seventeenth-century audiences. Building upon ancient classical thought, the early modern world viewed sexual change as possible and derived from multiple causes. Ribete alludes to Ovid's tale of the maiden Iphis, who is granted her wish to be transformed into a man thanks to the intervention of the goddess Isis (v. 514). However, for Caro's audiences, sex changes were real enough and not only the domain of poets. An affront such as the one suffered by Leonor could have transformed someone's sex, in a world that conceived of sex as a spectrum, with male and female at opposite ends, and the possibility of transformations. 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. Among the most famous examples, well-illustrated in books of medicine and news broadsheets, was Elena/o de Céspedes, who in 1587 declared before a court that s/he had become a man while giving birth to a son.

Mujeres varoniles were often described as sexually ambiguous. Leonor's physicality as a beardless man is built on this ambiguity. Estela finds Leonor/Leonardo immediately more attractive than any other man, while for the audience Leonor becomes a more attractive female, in either sexual or social terms. Leonor is also presented as an extremely logical and rational figure who shows concern for her family members and adversaries alike. From the beginning, she has arranged to hide her case from her

family, scheming along with her sister in a conscientious dissimulation that reveals strong female bonds and family ties. Furthermore, her male self exposes a woman's experience of the pointlessness of male deception and the male conception of honor. Dressed as Leonardo, she exposes the version of manhood embodied by prince Ludovico and Don Juan, whose values are reduced to inconsistency, egotism, and cowardice. As Robert Bayliss has noted, Leonor's solidarity with Estela (her rival for the love of Don Juan, whom she needs to "defeat" in order to save her own honor), makes her not only "the best man of the play" but is also a "better (hu)man" when compared with the men she has managed to outwit.

e. Overcoming Don Juan: Ana Caro's Response to the Myth

Leonor's unfaithful and inconstant lover, Don Juan de Córdoba, is Ana Caro's re-elaboration of the Don Juan myth, popularized first in folktales and then on the stage of corrales de comedias starting with the famous Trickster of Seville (*El burlador de Sevilla*), a play usually attributed to Tirso de Molina. The prototypical Don Juan 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 give 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. Caro writes back to the myth by assigning doubt and fear to her Don Juan and making him almost a parody. A playful reference hovers over Don Juan de Córdoba's first appearance in *Valor*, as Tibaldo, one of the thieves who tries to assault Estela and Lisarda, perceives him as a devilish creature to be avoided at all costs: "Fly, Astolfo, for this is a devil and not a man!" (vv. 171-72). Tibaldo's comment echoes the dark overtones of *The Trickster of Seville*, in which the protagonist ends up killed by the ghost of one of his victims, and conjures Don Juan's lack of pity. As in the myth, Don Juan de Córdoba comes from a noble family (the Córdobas, descendants of the Great Captain, a military hero who helped establish Spain's power across Europe, especially in Italy). Like his predecessor, this Don Juan, too, is a flatterer, and an unfaithful narcissist. As he explains to Fernando, Leonor's brother, his presence in Brussels is the result of unhappy events: he is running from town to town (from Madrid, to Córdoba, to Seville, to Lisbon, to Flanders) to escape the obligations incurred in his unrelenting search for new amorous encounters. We learn that he was expelled from Madrid because of certain love affairs that got him in trouble. In Seville he abandoned a woman (Leonor) whom he promised to marry (v. 388). After sleeping with her, he tired of their relationship and repented his involvement, driven by what he calls "his unstable stars" (vv. 402-405). Here, and unlike the character in the myth, Don Juan shows some sense of guilt. He deems his escape "impolite" (v. 407) and claims to have left Seville out of shame for "the unstable fate" that made him reject Leonor (vv. 408-410). Despite his inconstancy, Caro's Don Juan is able to recognize his own faults. But Don Juan's is not only a dubious character, he is also an ineffective one at times, as when the play's female characters manage to get in his way. Thus Leonor easily undoes

Don Juan's high-flying rhetoric: after he claims that a star (Leonor) has been outshone by a sun (his new love interest, Estela, vv. 1741-1764), Leonor claims that there was no sun on the horizon when the star was abandoned. With her own responses to Don Juan's metaphors, Leonor outwits her lover. Perhaps the most innovative feature of Caro's Don Juan in relation to the mythical predecessor is that Leonor manages to make don Juan humiliate himself, confess that he still loves her, and acknowledge his fault. Only then does she accept him as a husband and abandon the initial idea of killing him. In order to be reintegrated into society and love, Leonor's Don Juan must repent and to take on responsibility for his actions.

f. Female Solidarity

Valor offers a rich tapestry of female characters bound by ties of solidarity, a counterpoint to the homosocial bonds that other contemporary plays depict among men. Leonor consistently engages in relationships with other women. Before transforming herself into Leonardo, she concocts a ruse with her sister to hide her absence from her family (vv. 489-493). At the court, Leonor is highly aware that she might be harming another woman as she maneuvers to deceive Estela and thus prevent her from being paired with Don Juan. Yet Leonor remains determined: she pursues an outcome that is fair not only to her but also to others.

In addition to Leonor herself, other female role models populate the play, either as examples of braveness and courage (via classical references, such as the Amazons, the warrior Camilla, and the Goddess Isis), or as writers, such as the ancient Argentaria, Sapho, Areta, Blesilla, to which she adds "thousands of modern women that bestow supreme glory on Italy" (vv. 1177-78). These celebratory remarks are not oblivious to the struggle of women writers to obtain recognition. When Ribete briefs Tomillo on the novelties of Madrid, he voices criticism that might have circulated at the time, as he notes that in Madrid poets have become so numerous that "even women dare to write poetry, and compose plays" (vv. 1170-72). Tomillo replies: "Women poets? Wouldn't it be better for them to just sew and spin?" By having a character who is not particularly refined make that comment, the author seems to be denouncing the idea as equally rough and lacking in sophistication.

Finally, Leonor refrains from portraying herself as a model of female beauty. One even gets the impression that the topic is entirely unimportant to her. When Leonardo claims that he is related to Leonor, Don Fernando immediately inquires about Leonor, whether she is well and "extremely beautiful." Leonor-as-Leonardo avoids answering and tellingly redirects the conversation by replying: "She is courteous and virtuous" (vv. 640), prompting a validation by Don Fernando: "That suffices" (v. 643).

g. If Only This Were a Play! Theater Within the Theater

The gracioso, one of the key figures of Spanish Golden Age comedy, is generally a comedic lower-class character in the service of a nobleman-protagonist. While his appearance and purpose vary depending on the author, he is key to the functioning of the play. He often plays the fool, aspiring to an easy life in a way that highlights his avarice, gluttony, sloth, and cowardice. Yet he is also loyal, savvy, witty, and a true realist, regularly demonstrating a self-consciousness that gives his humor an ironic tinge. His humor counterbalances to the nobleman throughout their interactions and dialogue: the gracioso is unrestricted by the codes of conduct and rhetoric prevalent among the nobility, and, as such, has free rein to critique and distort the meanings of the actions, claims, and predilections that guide the play. In short, the gracioso provides a bridge between the idealism of the nobility and the reality of lived experience, as between the stage and the public. His presence delivers a certain “comic existentialism” that offers social criticism and underscores the unreality of the theater (Arango 379).

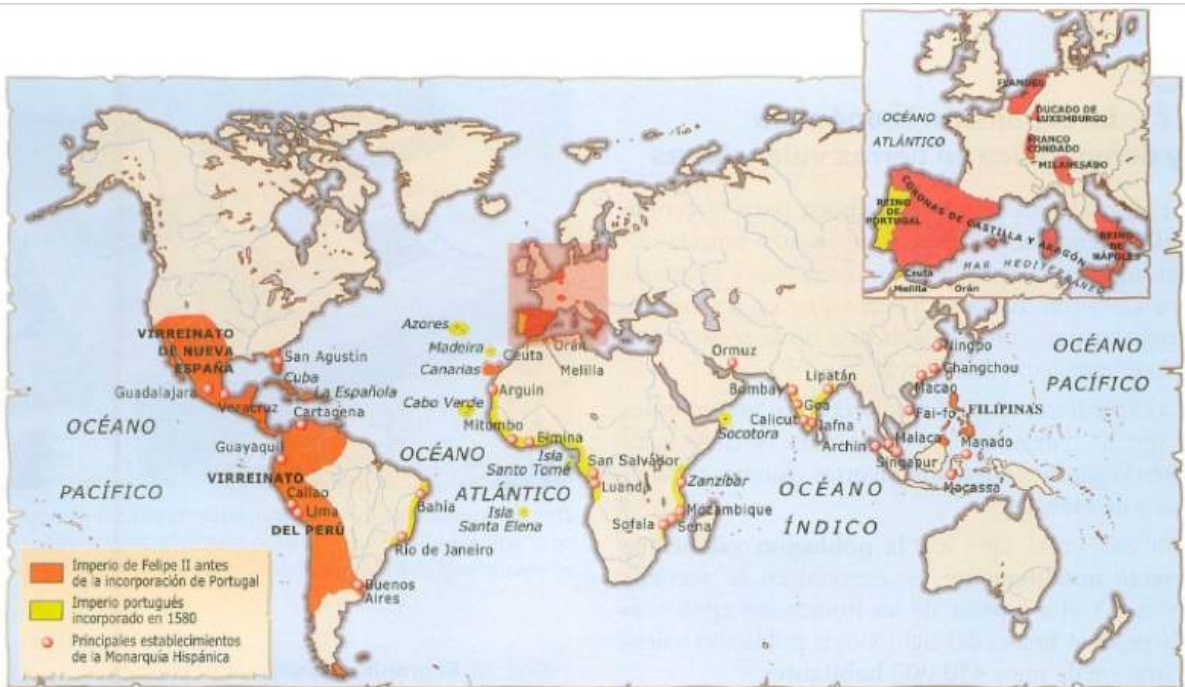
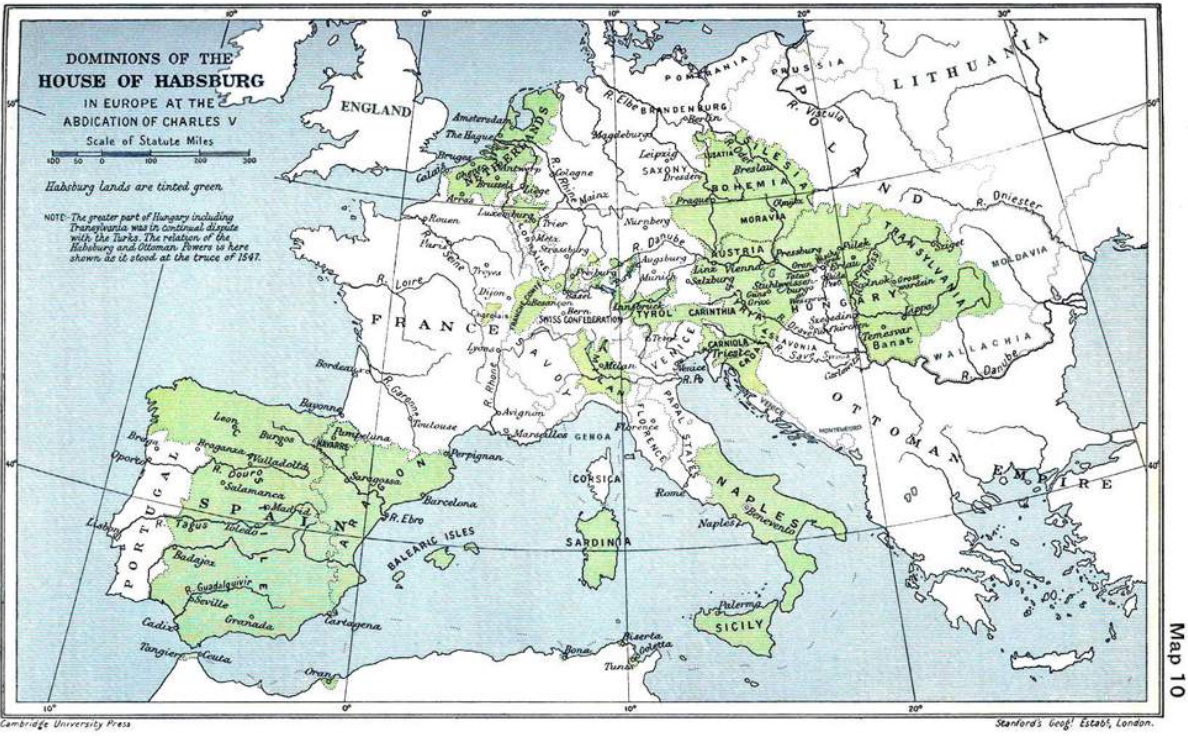
There are two graciosos in *Valor, Agravio y Mujer*, Don Juan’s servant, Tomillo, and Leonor’s servant, Ribete. Thus a double comparison arises: between the graciosos and their masters and between the two graciosos. Ribete shares in both Leonor’s heroism and her transgressions. In contrast with Tomillo, who presents on a lesser scale the faults of Don Juan, Ribete is not the butt of jokes or wholly banal. In fact, he makes two key metatheatrical points that pinpoint his insight and understanding of the social mores of the play. First, he declares to an approving, crossdressed Leonor that he cannot see why the servant of a gentleman should be a gracioso, that is, foolish and fearful, rather than a double of his master’s nobility, and notes the impropriety inherent in comedias, as they require both the gracioso’s buffoonery and his intelligent intervention for a happy ending (vv. 526-576). Second, in a conversation with Tomillo where he must maintain Leonor’s cover as Leonardo, Ribete speaks of Madrid and notes the new trend of women poets and playwrights, a direct reference to the nature of the play’s own author (vv. 1158-1182). When Tomillo responds with a joking misogyny that critics often associate with graciosos, Ribete ends the discussion with a list of examples that suggest there is nothing unusual about women writing. Interestingly, though the graciosos in Caro’s other surviving play get no romantic partner, she furnishes the worthy Ribete with a handsome dowry to marry Estela’s servant, Flora, who, perhaps also significantly, drugs and robs Tomillo.

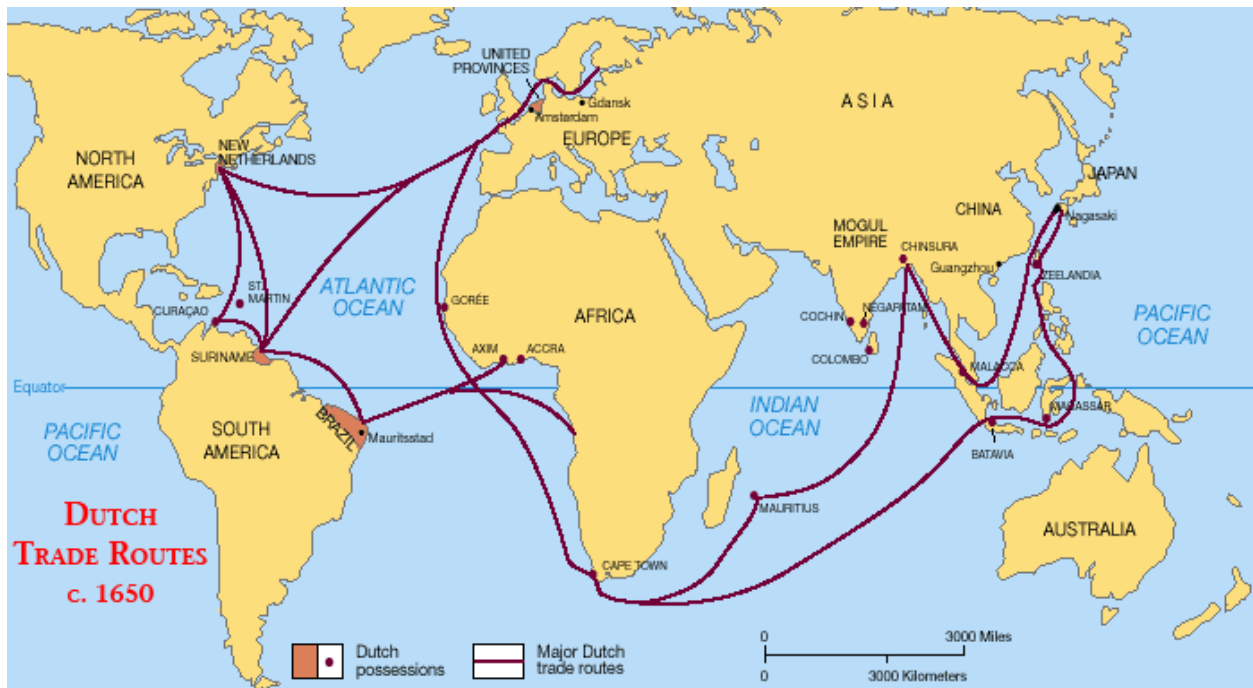
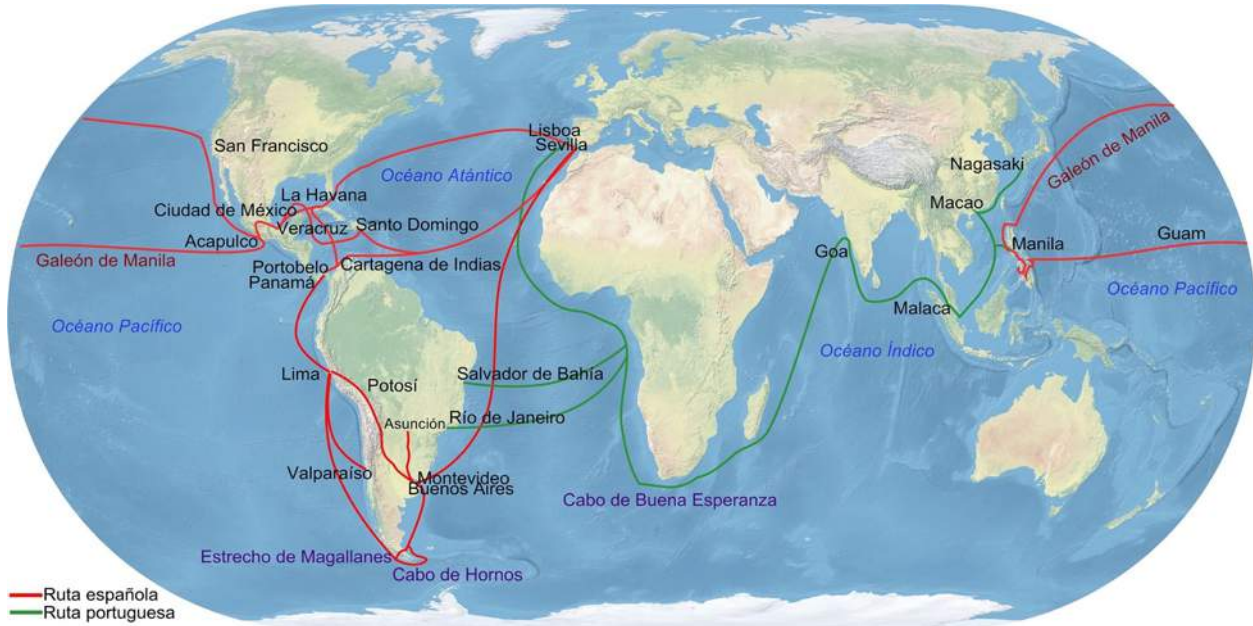
h. Life in a Global World

The play takes place in a bustling milieu of global exchange. It is set in the court at Brussels during the Twelve Years’ Truce, which interrupted the Eighty Years’ War between Spain and Holland over Habsburg Spanish dominion in the Netherlands (vv. 417-420, “Asiento tienen las treguas/ de las guerras con Holanda...”). Spain’s fraught relationship with the Netherlands began with Charles V who, born and raised in Flanders, inherited the Low Countries (roughly comprising what is now the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) as Duke of Burgundy and soon after coaxed

Flanders from French possession. His reign in the region, therefore, was considered natural despite his concurrent leadership of Spain, southern Italy, Austria and the German principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. However, with his 1556 abdication and the succession of his son Philip II to the throne, those ties to the Low Countries were lost in all but title. Philip was a very Spanish king, and his foreignness, fervent Catholicism, and harsh taxation practices stoked the flames of open rebellion in the Dutch Federation (or Seven Provinces), the largely Protestant area that would eventually become the Dutch Republic and modern-day Holland. With the 1579 Union of Utrecht, the northern provinces consolidated in opposition to Spain and the pro-Spanish Catholic South (modern Belgium and Luxembourg), and hostilities erupted into all-out warfare. By 1609 and the reign of Philip III, the extended cost of the conflict to both parties as well as their vested interests in maintenance of trade prompted a long truce. During the war and its peaceful interlude, the Netherlands, a flourishing center of world mercantilism and artistic production, loomed large in the Spanish artistic imagination. Flanders itself would become a recurring literary theme in Spanish Golden Age literature as a military proving ground/distant escape for young nobles. Most of the characters of *Valor, Agravio y Mujer* are in fact noble Spaniards abroad.

The full extent of international movement in this period can be further appreciated in the play's casual mention of travel, figures of world exploration, and global commodities. To begin, after meeting Fernando, Juan describes how he arrived at the setting of the play by a route that took him from Spain to Portugal to France to England and at last to Brussels (vv. 406-416). Leonor, who herself took the (straighter) path from Spain to Flanders, is often related to people of far-flung movement. For instance, she names her alter ego "Ponce de León", which, while a reference to an important family, also functions as a nod to Juan Ponce de León, the conquistador who led the first Spanish expedition through Florida. Moreover, in her opening conversation with Ribete, he associates her travels with those of Magellan, who circumnavigated the globe and put Europe in direct contact with East Asia. The path he traced would ultimately provide direction for the Iberian trade routes that would crisscross the world's oceans and introduce new goods and products into the European sphere. In Act III, for example, Estela's servant Flora drugs Tomillo with a chocolate concoction and, while searching him for money, finds tobacco (vv. 2366-2389; 2396-2398) and a tangle of silk thread (v. 2395). While Europe's main source of silk during this period was Persia, Spain, through its base in Manila, managed to broker a special trade relationship with China, importing a variety of luxury goods with an emphasis on silk in exchange for a steady export of Andean silver. (Spain also had access to Chinese silk by way of the Portuguese with their trade paths through India and in their role as intermediaries for Japan through Nagasaki.) The long Pacific route, with its American base in Acapulco, ultimately coincided with Spain's normal colonial convoy paths out of Veracruz. From there the empire transferred New World goods and luxuries such as tobacco and chocolate to the hub port at Seville, home not only to Leonor and the Ribera family but to La Casa de Contratación de las Indias, which oversaw overseas movement and trade throughout





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