

# **DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS**

## *Women and Servants* **Dramaturgy Packet**

*Women and Servants*  
by Lope de Vega

Dramaturgy packet compiled by Rafael Jaime

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# Women and Servants

A play by Lope de Vega

Lope de Vega's *Women and Servants* (*Mujeres y criados*, c. 1613-14) depicts a sophisticated urban culture of self-fashioning and social mobility, as the titular figures outsmart fathers and masters to marry those they love. Recently rediscovered in an overlooked 17th-century manuscript in Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional, the *comedia* emerges from its 400-year sleep with a remarkable freshness: it presents a world of suave dissimulation and accommodation, where creaky notions of honor and vengeance have virtually no place. Full protagonists of their own stories, women and servants take control of their fates despite their assigned roles in a patriarchal and hierarchical society.

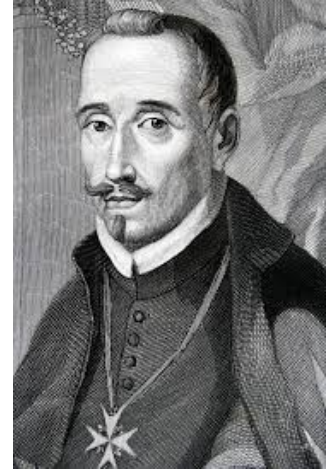
**Synopsis** Set in Madrid, *Women and Servants* tells the story of Luciana and Violante, the two daughters of the gentleman Florencio. The young women are in love with Teodoro and Claridán, secretary and valet, respectively, to Count Próspero. As the play opens, the Count decides to pursue Luciana. At the same time, Florencio's friend Emiliano proposes that Violante should marry his eligible son, Don Pedro. Presented with favorable alliances they do not want, the two sisters must manipulate the action to favor instead the men they love. Violante uses her wit and rhetorical prowess to demolish Don Pedro's pretensions, while Luciana concocts an elaborate plot in which almost all the characters find themselves entangled. Meanwhile, a subplot follows the loves and jealousies of the servants Inés, Lope, and Mars.

*Women and Servants* is the mature work of a playwright highly skilled at interweaving and resolving multiple plots. The play features two main storylines, as each of the sisters seeks marriage to the man she loves, with an additional subplot among the lower-class servants.

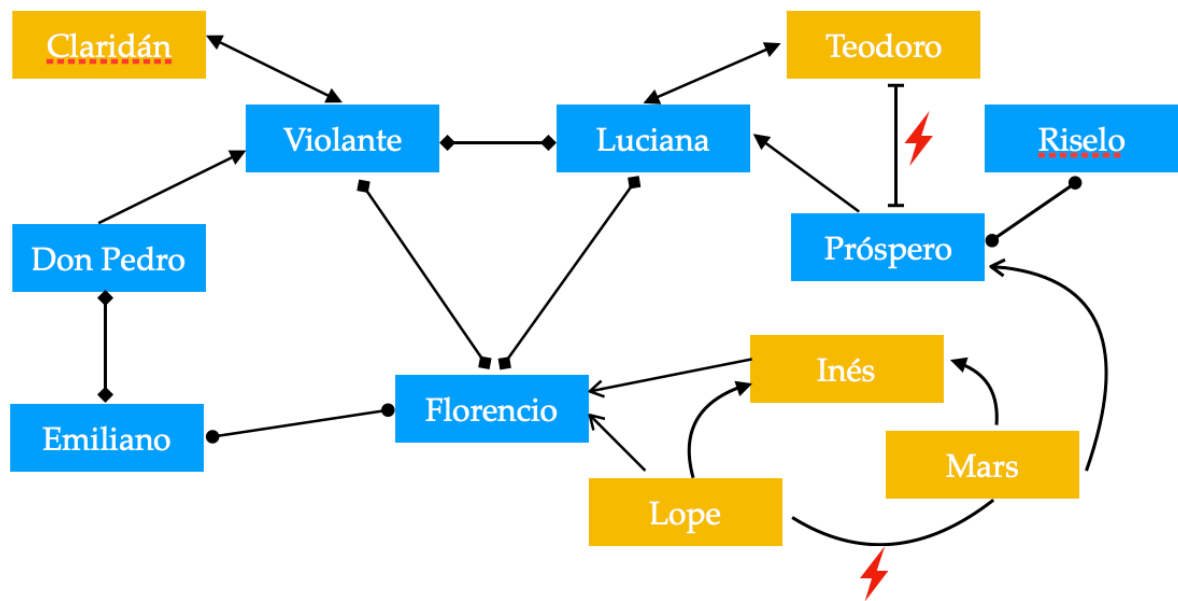
## Lope Félix de Vega Carpio (1562-1635)

Lope de Vega is the towering figure of the *comedia*. Born in Madrid to parents who had migrated to the capital from Spain's northern regions, he saw in his youth the emergence of the *corral* theaters where he would go on to make his name. Lope's plays often reveal a fascination with the city and all its possibilities: the urban space is not merely the backdrop but plays an important role in the unfolding narratives of his characters.

In his own time, Lope's fame arose out of his prodigious literary talent as well as his colorful biography, for the playwright's erotic life often left him on the wrong side of the law. Though Lope would go on to take orders in 1614, affairs that defied early modern Spanish religious and legal codes continued to dominate his life. He was accused of a relationship with a widow, carried on a sixteen-year affair with the married Marta de Nevaes, to whom he dedicated *The Widow of Valencia*, and left an unknown number of illegitimate children. Much as in his own life, Lope the playwright often tests the limits of order, authority, and liberty through acts of social transgression.



## Characters



Key:      ● — ●      ◆ — ◆      —>      —>      ⚡  
 Friendship      Family      Love      Service      Rivalry

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Count Próspero | The debonair master who finds himself competing with his servant for the love of Luciana. Well aware of the privileges afforded to him by his status, he is not above spying behind trees.  |
| Claridán       | Próspero's valet. He and Violante are in love with each other, but he must suffer through Don Pedro's courtship of her due to his status as a servant.  |
| Teodoro        | Próspero's secretary. The object of Luciana's affections, he incurs the jealous revenge of his master. In his predicament, he must negotiate between loyalty to his master and personal freedom, all the while guided by Luciana. |
| Riselo         | A gentleman and Count Próspero's friend.  |
| Mars           | A footman in Count Próspero's house. Contrary to what his name suggests, he is a boastful coward.   |
| Lope           | Footman to Florencio. He is in love with Inés but is worried about Mars as his rival.   |
| Emiliano       | An old friend of Florencio. He seeks to have Violante marry his son, Don Pedro.   |
| Pedro          | Emiliano's son. Attracted to Violante, he seeks a cure for his feelings for her.  |
| Florencio      | Luciana and Violante's father. He is eager to marry his daughters, but recognizes their say in the matter.  |

Luciana

Emiliano's daughter, in love with Teodoro. Strong-willed and sharp, she concocts an elaborate plan to marry the person she desires.

Violante

Equally sharp and strong-willed, she uses her rhetorical skills and wit to get her way.

Inés

A servant in Emiliano's household. She plays her suitors against each other as she makes up her mind about them.

## Contexts

*The Comedia Form*

The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

# Themes

## *Class*

*Women and Servants* deals directly with questions of gender and class. The glaringly absent term in the title is *masters*—the patriarchal figures of authority to whom both women and servants in early modern Spain would have owed allegiance. By sidelining lords and masters, the play offers an alternative view of the world, focused instead on figures who must rely on creativity and wit. *Women and Servants* depicts a fluid continuum of class rather than a rigid hierarchy of castes—a situation that even father and masters come to accept with reluctant forbearance. The play suggests that servants raised in a noble house could learn the trappings of courtliness and civility so well as to out-charm their masters, thereby attaining an elusive social mobility. Perhaps even more daringly, *Women and Servants* proposes that those of a lower social standing can mimic and successfully impersonate their betters. No elaborate, outlandish trick is required here, no story of captivity or lost children. Instead, the play simply underscores how an enterprising fellow raised with access to aristocratic behavior can easily acquire or, at least, reproduce the marks of social distinction. Whatever one might believe about the relationship of blood to status, urbanity is eminently an acquired trait.

## *Gender*

The women of the play have remarkable control over their own fates, and particularly their love lives. They live by their wits, and by their power to persuade. Luciana not only convinces Teodoro to open his master's letter to someone else, but also manages to have her father harbor a strange man in the same house as his unmarried daughters. For her part, Violante convinces Don Pedro that, despite her dazzling wit and intelligence, she is not the right match for him, as she simply does not love him.

Wit opens up a space for female agency and also serves as a



vehicle for questioning traditional forms of masculinity. Ironizing the notion of a masculine honor that must resort to violence in response to jealousy or any other perceived slight, the play shows how flexible gender norms become as they are performed. Well beyond the ironically named Mars, the braggart who hides when he fears a street fight, the play pokes fun at the violent masculinity that men must display to uphold their public selves. Unable to resort to violence against their masters, men of lower standing must renounce a belligerent masculinity as they turn to their wits instead to outsmart those of higher rank. Ultimately, *Women and Servants* exposes honor and vengeance as ill-suited to the performative, fluid universe of a burgeoning Madrid.

### *The City*

Much of the power to challenge societal norms in *Women and Servants* is afforded by the urban setting of the play. After becoming Phillip II's capital in 1561, Madrid grew rapidly, its development intertwined with both the court and the popular theater. It quickly became a privileged stage for the display of both political power and cultural brilliance. The scale of the city and its rapid transformation altered social interactions within the urban space. Anonymity and dissimulation became newly possible, a feature many *comedias* exploit brilliantly. Veiled, disguised, or discreetly hidden in a carriage, women in the urban space could choose to be seen or unseen in a way that afforded them unprecedented agency and control over their own sexuality.

## Staging Opportunities & Challenges

### *Act 1 — Steel-Water*

The play exploits the seventeenth-century urban fashion for steel-water (*acero*) for purposes that go beyond mere comedic effect. Steel-water was used as a cure for the supposed condition of “oppilation”—a kind of anemia caused by young women eating clay in order to appear fashionably pale. It consisted of drinking

water in which a heated iron rod had been doused and following the treatment with a long walk. Just as the steel blade represents a weapon for men, steel-water becomes a weapon for the women in *Women and Servants*. The play thus demands careful attention to the entire conceptual universe of *steel*, as it is central to its exploration of female agency.

### *Act II—Letter-Opening Scene*

Central to this scene is a challenge to both class and gender hierarchies: Luciana's call to open Próspero's letter questions the authority of the master while at the same time driving home how much greater are her agency and initiative than Teodoro's. The scene also connects the personal and the political, with Luciana's metaphor of love as the city that chooses its own leader. Luciana simultaneously asserts the right for a subject—and a woman at that—to freely choose marriage and reject feudal structures. While the text emphasizes female agency, this can easily be undermined by mistaking Luciana's sharpness for charm in her ability to influence Teodoro. It is important to remember that this is a play in which women are in charge.

### *Act III—Final Scene*

In the final scene's conflict between the male masters and servants, the threat of physical violence offers an opportunity for marvelously effective theatricality. Despite their recourse to violent pronouncements, male violence and lordly authority have been systematically undermined throughout the play, and the sisters' marriages to the servants are now a *fait accompli*. Though Count Próspero invokes his authority over the life of his servants, he has little power to change things. The play's critique of violence and aristocratic privilege culminates in what is arguably an impotent display of traditional masculinity, rather than a real threat of physical violence.

## Performance History

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| October 2014      | World premiere after its 2014 rediscovery in a production by Leo Cabranes-Grant (UCSB) in San Juan, Puerto Rico.          |
| April 29, 2015    | Production co-directed by Laurence Bowell and Rodrigo Arribas at the Teatro Español in Madrid for Fundación Siglo de Oro. |
| April 29, 2015    | Staged reading by Chalk Repertory Theater at UCLA directed by Larissa Kokernot.   |
| November 10, 2017 | Production by McMaster University's School of the Arts (Hamilton, Canada), directed by Peter Cockett.                     |
| December 10, 2018 | Staged reading by New York Classical Theater, directed by Stephen Burdman.  |

## 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.

Count Próspero: PROHS-PEH-ROH

Claridán: CLAH-REE-DAHN

Teodoro: TEH-OH-DOH-ROH

Riselo: REE-SEH-LOH

Lope: LOH-PEH

Emiliano: EH-MEE-LYAH-NOH

Don Pedro: DOHN PEH-DROH

Florencio: FLOH-REHN-SEE-OH

Luciana: LOO-SYAH-NAH

Violante: VEE-OH-LAHN-TEH

Inés: EE-NEHS

Florianica: FLOH-RYAH-NEE-CAH

Fabio: FAH-BYOH

Lidoro-LEE-DOH-ROH

## Further Reading

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