

DIVERSIFYING THE CLASSICS

The Widow of Valencia

Dramaturgy Packet

Compiled by Robin Kello

The Widow of Valencia

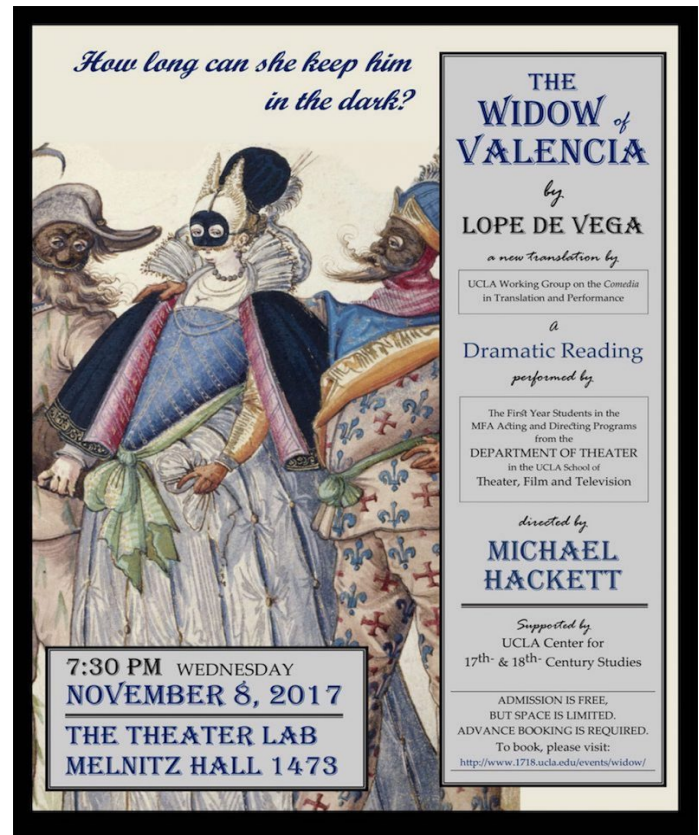
A play by Lope Félix de Vega y Carpio

How might a young widow satisfy her desire while preserving her independence? In *The Widow of Valencia*, Lope de Vega presents us with the wealthy and beautiful Leonarda, who defies the wishes of her uncle by refusing to remarry. After a few glances shared with a young gallant in church reawaken her passion, she begins a masked affair in which disguise offers the rewards of pleasure without risk.

This play offers a balancing act of visibility and invisibility, as Leonarda's brilliant transgressions in the service of her desire play out against a carnivalesque backdrop.

Synopsis The play begins with the widow Leonarda's defiance of her uncle Lucencio, who wants her to give up her independence and remarry to protect her reputation. Meanwhile, Lisandro, Otón, and Valerio, the buffoonish trio of her most avid admirers, decide that each has an equal chance at winning Leonarda's hand, and they agree not to get in each other's way. That day, Leonarda becomes smitten with a young man with whom she exchanged a glance during mass. After discovering his identity, she entrusts her squire Urbán to tell the man, Camilo, that a noblewoman wants to secretly see him by night. Urbán and Camilo set off for the house.

On the way, they meet Otón, who decides to spy on the widow. While Leonarda and Camilo enjoy themselves and pledge their love, the suitors stand outside the house to snoop, each unaware of the others until the arrival of a sheriff convinces them that Leonarda must be hiding someone in the house. Lucencio then receives an offer from the messenger Rosano regarding a match in Madrid for Leonarda. While out for a walk with her servant Julia, Leonarda encounters Camilo and his servant



Floro. Camilo doesn't recognize her but tells the women that he is in love with a lady he can never see. Leonarda tests his devotion by asking if there is another woman for whom he would leave his mysterious lover, but he remains loyal. Later that evening, the three rejected suitors set upon Urbán, whom they think must be the secret lover, but Camilo intervenes.

Leonarda sees Camilo arguing with his former lover Celia and asks him if she is his secret paramour. He flatters Leonarda but admits he has grown tired of the nightly arrangement with the lady. Leonarda, angry and jealous of herself, concedes to her uncle's wishes and agrees to the marriage in Madrid. To protect her reputation, she sends Urbán to serve her older cousin, so as to mislead Camilo about the identity of the secret lady. When Lisandro notices the messenger Rosano leaving the house, he assumes it is Urbán (whom he thinks is Leonarda's lover) and stabs him. While Camilo's romance with Leonarda seems to be coming to an end, Floro agrees to marry Celia. Leonarda then promises Camilo she will reveal her identity. At her house, Camilo shines a lantern on her face and recognizes his lover as the widow he sees by day. This upsets Leonarda, and Lucencio, hearing her raised voice, enters the room. Once discovered, Leonarda proposes marriage to Camilo. Lucencio calls for witnesses, and the servants and suitors, already in the house, bless the marriage. Urbán follows by asking for Julia's hand.

Lope Félix de Vega Carpio (1562–1635)

In his own time, Lope's fame arose out of his prodigious literary talent as well as his colorful biography, and 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, scandals dominated his life, and caused him to be banished temporarily from Madrid. He went to Valencia, where this play is set. He was accused of a

Lope is the towering figure of the *comedia*. Born in Madrid, he saw in his youth the emergence of the *corral* theaters where he would go on to make his name. In his *New Art of Making Plays in Our*

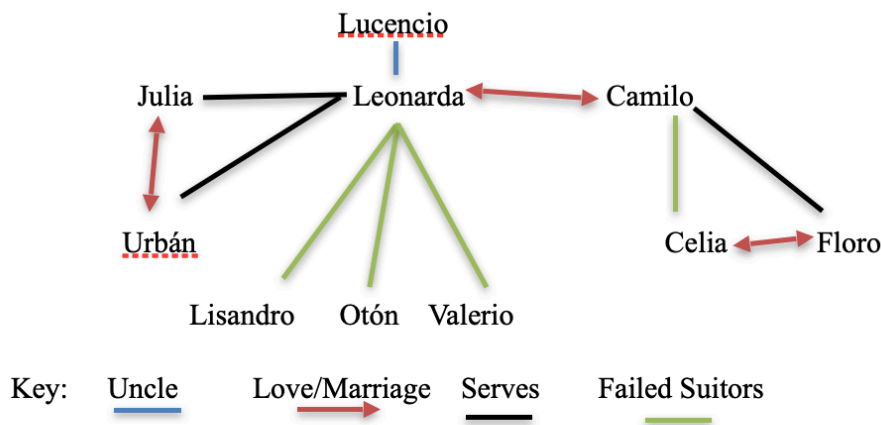


relationship with a widow, carried on a sixteen-year affair with the married Marta de Nevares, to whom he dedicated *The Widow of Valencia*, and left an unknown number of illegitimate children.

Despite the scandals of his life, Lope was a truly successful commercial playwright, who earned income as well as fame through his literary efforts. Today he is best remembered for the drama he came to define—the quick, witty *comedia* of the Spanish Golden Age. Miguel de Cervantes, his contemporary, may not have meant it as a compliment when he called Lope a “monster of nature” (*monstruo de la naturaleza*), as the two masters were not on friendly terms. Yet Lope’s prodigious output was fundamental to defining the theater of the age that spanned his life.

Characters

Relationship Map



LEONARDA

A wealthy widow, niece of Lucencio, lover (and eventually wife) of Camilo. Bold, clever, fiercely independent protagonist of the drama.

LUCENCIO

Uncle of Leonarda. An old man who is concerned with the reputation of his widowed niece and the demands of social status and wishes for her to remarry.

URBÁN

Squire to Leonarda and a servant in the household. He helps Leonarda secretly host Camilo in the house. Urbán is the closest figure in the play to the *gracioso*, or servant side-kick, of *comedia*.

JULIA	Servant in Leonarda's household. Leonarda's confidante at the beginning of the play, she assists Urbán and Leonarda with Camilo's secret visits. Eventually marries Urbán.
CAMILO	Secret suitor to Leonarda, whom he marries at the end.
FLORO	Servant to Camilo, he eventually agrees to marry Celia.
CELIA	Camilo's spurned former lover and future wife of Floro.
LISANDRO	Buffoonish suitor to Leonarda who makes feeble attempts to woo her.
VALERIO	Buffoonish suitor to Leonarda (with Lisandro and Otón).
OTÓN	Buffoonish suitor to Leonarda (with Lisandro and Valerio).
ROSANO	Messenger from Madrid, stabbed by Lisandro as he comes out of Leonarda's house.
SHERIFF	Comes to Leonarda's house and finds the three suitors outside.
SCRIBE	Assists the sheriff.
SERVANTS	Help keep the suitors at bay when they come in pretending to sell wares.

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*. 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.

Female Roles

The Spanish stage permitted actresses to play female roles, thus giving playwrights the opportunity to develop a variety of characters for them. Indeed, the classic character types in the *comedia* are the *galán* (male lead), *dama* (female lead), and the *gracioso* (a side-kick who serves up comic quips that comment on the main themes). Actresses became extremely famous, and the powerful roles they played onstage often portrayed the force of female sexuality. Cross-dressing plots, which interrogate the performative nature of gender and at times explore same-sex desire, were common. *The Widow of Valencia* presents audiences with a *dama* who is the center of the play, and the main plot of the drama is driven by her wit and willpower.

Widows in Early Modern Spain

In 17th-century Spain, daughters were subject to fathers, and wives to husbands. Widows, however, were able to own property and businesses, and see to their affairs without deference to a man, thus evading the strictures that limited their independence. *The Widow of Valencia* dramatizes widowhood in the conflict

between Leonarda's desire to express her sexuality and to maintain her status as widow. Leonarda's deft navigation of gender roles shows the force of female desire beyond the social norms that attempted to regulate women. As neither daughter nor wife, Leonarda may act according to her will rather than the dictates of her society.

Themes

The dominant theme of the play is female agency and desire within a context of strict gender norms. As a widow, Leonarda is less subject to patriarchal control. As a woman with sexual needs, however, she must rely on her cleverness and willingness to transgress social norms to achieve her ends without damaging her reputation. Leonarda's careful plotting manages to elude the constraints of her society and reveals the brittleness of social codes when faced with a creative, indomitable will. The play highlights the limitations of gender norms, the irrepressible force of erotic desire, and the avenues for female agency despite restrictive social regulation.

While female sexuality is center stage, the play also takes an interest in homosocial male bonding. The trio of comic suitors offers audiences a vision of three weak men vying for the same powerful woman, united and divided by their common desire. While they recite sonnets and regale each other with tales of Leonarda's "favors," they perform homosocial bonding through bragging and competition, ultimately developing closer ties to each other than to the lady they desire. Meanwhile, Camilo and Urbán bond over their shared secret and the nightly visits to Leonarda's house, and repeatedly express a mutual, nearly erotic affection for each other, although they both end up in gender-normative pairs at the end.

Just as Urbán comments on Camilo's attractiveness, the play explores the notion that beauty—and erotic desire—begins with the visual. The references to vision, including portraits, mirrors, and tapestries, underscore the irony that Camilo is in the dark while he visits Leonarda.

Leonarda's plan depends not just on Camilo being left in the dark, but on the fact that it is Carnival in Valencia. During Carnival, excesses of all kinds precede the self-denial and introspection of Lent. Leonarda's transgression and subversion of gender roles are made possible by the uninhibited revelry of a holiday season which temporarily suspends the strictures of society. As Leonarda

herself observes, “Valencia is all a riot at Carnival/ with masks and costumes.” While the festival occurs outdoors, inside Leonarda’s home the world is also turned upside-down, taking advantage of traditional disguises and public street parties, the widow enlists her servants and lover in a game of masks.

Challenges & Opportunities

*Act 1, Scenes 4–6 and
13–15; Act 2, Scenes
6–8—The Suitors*

This series of scenes provides a remarkable opportunity for comic relief. While the suitors are mostly incidental to the primary plot, their hyperbolic language and many pratfalls provide directors with a chance to poke fun at their braggadocio and offer some comedy to contrast with the erotic drive of the play.

*Act 2, Scene 5—First
Encounter*

As everything else in this play revolves around Leonarda’s passion for Camilo and his reluctance, assent, and then return to indecision, their first meeting is crucial. Julia and Urbán remain onstage for the entire rendezvous, which may seem both surprising and titillating to modern audiences. The direction and stage design could also make use here of the fact that they are supposed to be in the dark, while taking into account how to present the disguises of the characters and the ornate decorations of Leonarda’s home.

Act 3, Scene 1

In Celia’s only scene, her small but insistent role is a great opportunity for an actor to show off their skills. The disturbing gender politics of the argument between Celia and Camilo would also be worthwhile for any production to consider very closely.

Act 3, Scene 11-13

The minor subplot involving Leonarda’s cousin is also disturbing in its representation of gender. Thinking that he has slept with Leonarda’s cousin, who is presented as much older and unattractive, Camilo’s erupts in misogynistic rage.

Production History

The play has enjoyed several productions in Spain since the 1960s, with one in the Teatro María Guerrero in Madrid in 1960 and two separate television adaptations with Televisión Española in 1975 and 1983. In 2008, the Teatro Rialto in Valencia reopened with a production of the play, probably the first staging in Valencia since 1599. More recently, an adaptation of the play was produced by the Spanish television program “Estudio 1” for Televisión Española, airing first in 2010 and again in 2012. With a runtime of 73 minutes, this version offers a fast-paced adaptation of the source material which heightens the eroticism of the original for a modern audience.

UCLA’s Diversifying the Classics translation was performed as a staged reading directed by Michael Hackett on November 8, 2017, and by New York Classical Theater on June 18, 2018.

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.

Lucencio: LOO-SEHN-SEE-OH

Julia: HOO-LEE-AH

Camilo: CAH-MEE-LOH

Celia: SEH-LEE-AH

Valerio: VAH-LEH-REE-OH

Rosano: ROH-SAHN-NOH

Friar Luis: LOO-EES

Real: REH-AHL

Doblon: DOH-BLOHN

Galatea: GAH-LAH-TEH-AH.

Gálvez Montalvo: GAHL-VEHS MOHN-TAHL-VOH

Espinel: EHS-PEE-NEHL

Leonarda: LEH-OH-NAHR-DAH

Urbán: OOR-BAHN

Floro: FLOH-ROH

Oton: OH-TOHN

Leandro: LEE-SAHN-DROH

Valencia: VAH-LEHN-SEE-AH

San Juan: SAHN HOO-AHN

Reales: REH-AHL-EHS

Shepherd of Fílida: FEE-LEE-DAH

Julio: HOO-LEE-OH

Carranza: CAH-RAHN-SAH

Miguel de Cervantes: MEE-GEHL DEH SEHR-
VAHN-TEHS
Guzmán: GOOS-MAHN

Clara: CLAH-RAH
Ercino: EHR-SEE-NOH
Zaidía: SAH-EE-DEE-AH

Further Reading

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