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Author: Elizabeth Rhodes

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REDRESSING ANA CARO'S Valor, agravio y mujer

Elizabeth Rhodes
Boston College

Works by early modern women are often interpreted today through the lens of feminism, and Ana Caro's well-known comedy, Valor, agravio y mujer, is no exception. Through this lens, the adrenalin of the spectator/reader surges in the company of Leonor, whose theatrical manipulation of words and appearances is one of most entertaining feats in the comedia. The thrill, however, endures only until the final scene, at whose conclusion Caro betroths Leonor to the unfaithful, if repentant, don Juan.

As others have repeatedly observed, any statements the play might make about female agency and power seem debilitated by the borrowed masculinity in which Caro vested Leonor while making those statements, on the one hand, and, on the other, her final betrothal to a disloyal man who has to be duped into declaring his enduring affection for her. Critics conclude that dramatic and social conventions dictated both the male attire for the protagonist and her final reunion with her wayward lover, and that in her play Caro interrogates dominant dramatic standards without relinquishing them. Such an interpretation necessitates conformity to the very norms that the

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1. Valor, agravio y mujer was written between 1628 and 1653. On the history of the text, see Lola Luna (“Introducción” 47–48). I cite Luna’s edition.
2. For example, Mercedes Maroto Camino; Maria M. Carrión; Luna (“Introducción”); Teresa S. Soufas (“Ana”; “Feminist”).
3. Amy Katz Kaminsky says the play’s “pat ending [. . .] bows to the conventions of the genre” (204); Luna finds in it “sumisión a una convención dramática” (“Introducción” 31). See also Beatriz Cortez; Deborah Dougherty; Laura Gorfke; Ruth Lundelius; Soufas (Dramas 30); Matthew D. Stroud; Sharon Voros (“Fashioning”); and Rina Walthaus.

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play’s interior effectively resists, suggesting not that Caro settled for less than what Leonor’s activism promises, but rather that another interpretative lens might be appropriate for the play.

What little is known about Caro’s life reveals her to be a truly exceptional artist. An acclaimed master author of the most public textual forms of her day, the relación and the comedia, she is one of Spain’s first known professional writers, a woman whose artistic ability was celebrated so effectively that praise for it endures today. She was, as Lola Luna has said, a woman in the position to enunciate the discourses legitimized by the cultural instances of baroque power ("Ana" 11). As such, her case poses an intriguing question: does a publicly empowered female artist’s enunciation of these discourses signify in the same fashion as those of her equally or more empowered male contemporaries, or those of other female artists who did not occupy her public position of cultural authority? To state it differently, when an empowered female author’s characters willfully enact behaviors prescribed by a potentially repressive ideology ("women dressed as men are imitating men"; "good women marry"), does it necessarily signify conformity to repression?

If one answers “no” to both questions, it is possible to assert that Caro not only meant Leonor’s male attire to be read as a revelation rather than a cover-up, but also that its ending satisfied her beyond the exigencies of convention. It would thus conform, marriage and all, to standards fully operative in the seventeenth century. Valor’s internal logic suggests that the dramatist and her public understood Leonor’s cross-dressing and final union with the wayward don Juan as certain triumph. The question is: how? A feminist reading cannot answer that question if it interprets Leonor’s borrowed breeches and her reiterated betrothal to don Juan as compromising. Because the play self-consciously supports women’s interests, it is particularly important to reconcile those interests with the two dramatic features that appear to frustrate them.

As Froma I. Zeitlin has shown, long-standing dramatic praxis in the western tradition plays woman in a specular fashion, as an objectified character who facilitates the realization of male interests or serves as “the problem.” But in Valor, Caro establishes Leonor as the solution, thereby disallowing masculinist interests to preempt either strength of character or the marriage

4. María José Delgado provides the most complete biography of Caro to date; Denise A. Walen cites archival records of her salaries; Voros studies Caro’s relaciones ("Relaciones").
plot. Hypothesizing that Caro’s dramatic objective, or that of any dramatist whose characters are in a similar bind, services an agenda other than gender could liberate her heroine to marry because she pleases. The same objective would allow her to dress up as a man to serve that agenda without compromising her interests.

Examining dramatic syntax in this way reveals any plot as a potentially homophonic narrative. If articulated patriarchally, it signifies both that the cross-dressed woman is acting like a man as well as looking like one, on the one hand, and that marriage rightly means the control of women, on the other. In a non-patriarchal articulation, the same plot may signify, for example, that women can perform success in any clothing, and that marriage signifies social legitimacy. Recognizing the multivalent potential of dramatic tropes, such as the cross-dressed woman, the mujer varonil, and the marriage plot, allows the use of those tropes to signify specifically in accordance with the dramatist’s objectives, which must be deciphered individually.5

Several critics find that Caro appropriates, breaks down, interrogates, challenges, and manipulates codes of meaning that repress women. Taking that argument further, others find that she entirely inverts patriarchal norms in Valor.6 Keeping in mind that Caro was a culturally empowered female dramatist whose characters are manifestly unthreatened by patriarchal constraints, one can read Leonor not only as a manipulation or inversion of repressive notions about women (and, necessarily, a temporary one), but also as an active character moving on the offense through the plot to get what she wants and deserves. From the chronological beginning of the play, Leonor is an agent of her own sexuality who enters into a social contract that don Juan violates; her desire to marry him is evident in the action that has transpired before the play even begins. Like the seventeenth-century heroic figure she is, she does not waver in her word or her deed but instead single-mindedly seeks her goal.

Entering the text from the site culturally determined to signify chastity (woman), Leonor also embraces chastity by choice: she is a high-mimetic

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5. Cf. Angela Carter’s wry observation that “the notion of a universality of human experience is a confidence trick and the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick” (qtd. in Brownlee 215). Carter, a British author, lived from 1940 to 1992.

6. The critics cited in note 3 stress Caro’s manipulation of patriarchal norms and ultimate capitulation to them. Camino, Dian Fox, Mujica, Elizabeth Ordóñez, Walen, Walthaus, and Amy R. Williamsen stress inversion, also using patriarchal models as the standard.
character who actively participates in the social management of sex in conformity with her community’s standards. In configuring her heroine, Caro scripts Leonor as the heroic defender of social order, not in spite of her character’s wants and needs but because of them. In this light, the plot may be interrogated in a fashion that respects Leonor’s subjective status in the play: how does dressing as a man and then marrying one serve her and the community whose interests she represents? If one is willing to assume that Caro was choosing rather than acceding, then she chose a cross-dressed heroine who single-mindedly seeks to marry a wayward man as a means of articulating something other than female repression.

It is likely that Caro was scripting justice in Valor and, because she cast a woman in the heroic role, the play cannot but appear subversive when read in the context of comedias by men who rarely used female characters as the primary agents of order and heroism. That subversion is a byproduct of the poetics of justice, whose structure accommodates the retributive force of Leonor’s cross-dressing and her betrothal to don Juan as a corrective reapportioning of responsibility. Through the lens of justiciary poetics, Valor becomes a comedy in which Caro advances a moral principle: the verbal articulation of a promise has enduring value because noble integrity guarantees the contractual validity of performative speech. Or, more simply and specifically, in the justice plot, a promise to marry will exact the marriage or death of the promising party.8

This moral principle is particularly well suited for the justice narrative, whose plot is driven by the imperative to redress an undeserved injustice, posited at the play’s beginning and resolved as close to the final line as possible. The author creates disorder that expands to proportions apparently impossible to resolve, only to efficiently untangle everything of a sudden, fully and finally engaging justice’s hygienic force. When a woman is both the undeservedly offended party and the avenger of the offense, the work collaterally protects women’s rights, part and parcel with its assurance that all accounts will be settled by the final act. Setting Valor, agravio y mujer in the

7. After the late Middle Ages in Europe, chastity meant fidelity in relationships. A chaste person was thus a sexually faithful person, not necessarily one who practiced sexual abstinence (Atkinson).

8. It is likely that Caro named her male protagonist after the burlador don Juan. Although El burlador de Sevilla, attributed to Tirso de Molina, also enacts justice, it does so differently than Valor, via mimetic descent that feminizes the villain male while denigrating those who collude with his excesses; see Rhodes.
service of justice rather than gender releases it from the irreconcilable tension produced by stretching it between feminism and patriarchy, allowing it to relax into a potent display of normalized female agency. In Caro’s play, female strength is a necessary and celebrated resource of the community, and marriage is the surest signifier of female merit. In this context, the heroine’s clothing and betrothal come into focus with the rest of the plot.

According to Ullrich Langer, during the Renaissance “the discourse of the virtues is widely available and permeates many levels of literature, both as a theme and as a structuring device” (313). The Aristotelian ethical paradigm that informed early modern understanding held that justice was the cardinal virtue containing all others (prudence, wisdom, fortitude, temperance) and that it had “the greatest splendor and [was] essential to the functioning of human society” (313–14). Not until the Enlightenment did this moral language crumble, and in the seventeenth century it “was beginning to experience the sapping of its foundations, or was still enjoying the last decades of the bronze age” (312). For the public of Caro’s time, says Langer, “in essence literature conveys and argues moral truths in pleasing ways” (312).

A frequent source of dramatic tension in Golden Age Spain is the conflict that can arise between merely human justice, designed to perpetuate a specific structure of social power, and what the social collective defines as moral truth, which equalizes human beings as if from a divine perspective. This dilemma manifests the thorny contradictions between civic legal codes (men’s) and ecclesiastical law (presumably God’s). For a man to murder an unfaithful wife in seventeenth-century Spain was morally lethal for the Catholic soul, according to the operative code of ethics, but was nonetheless sanctioned by civil law. Jurist Alonso de la Vega’s popular Suma (1606) registers the norms of moral justice for seventeenth-century Spain, pointing overtly to the discrepancy between human and divine mandates on the point of honor. Speaking of the homicidal man avenging an offense of dishonor committed by or through a woman, he says, “aunque es verdad que las leyes le dan por libre, permitiéndolo, con todo eso peca mortalmente matándola por su autoridad propia” (185). Early seventeenth-century prescriptive treatises point consistently to this discrepancy. Francisco Escrivá, a Jesuit theologian, elaborates on the problem in his treatise Discursos de los estados, first published in 1613:

9. This Aristotelian understanding was current in Spain; specifically: in his 1611 dictionary, Covarrubias defines “justice” by remitting to a juridical text citing Aristotle’s Ethics (692b).
No quiere Dios que el marido se vengue y mate a su mujer, aunque la coja juntamente con el adultero. Si bien las leyes humanas no se lo tienen prohibido, condescendiendo con la flaqueza del hombre y el pesar de indignación tan fuerte que por entonces está abrazando su corazón, incitándole y provocándole a que tome venganza de lo que tan gravemente le ofenden. No se puede encarecer con palabras lo que siente el hombre que se ve en semejante trance y afrenta. [...] Si siente tanto el marido el agravio que le hace la mujer, no siente menos, sino más la mujer el que le hace el marido. (103–04)

Similarly, Catholic ethics and civil law alike condemned the man who promised to marry a noblewoman and then abandoned her. 10 Nonetheless, the behavior was protected by a bastion of social praxis that made retribution for offenses against a woman’s honor public, therefore shameful and thus unlikely, if not impossible. 11 Caro invests Leonor with the power of moral justice, or God’s law, thereby pitting her against human justice and social praxis, which tended to empower white, Catholic noblemen at the expense of others.

Moral justice adheres to divine mandates and safeguards the ethics defined by a community; civil justice protects and sustains a form of human governance; personal vengeance satisfies individual needs, often at the expense of ethical precepts. Any writer conscious of the contradictions between civil and moral codes who wished to equalize power between women and men would necessarily invoke moral justice, versus legal retribution or personal vengeance, because it was the only code with the potential to chastise members

10. Glosses of Alfonso el Sabio’s Siete partidas, such as that of Gregorio López (first published in 1555), treat the moral and civic obligations of marriage promises, as well as the penalties for failing to keep the word given in that promise, in the commentaries on the fourth Partida: the first titles of that section treat “los desposorios, los casamientos, desposajas y casamientos encubiertos; condiciones en las desposajas” (López 1r–v). Moral codes of behavior can be examined in confessor’s manuals, such as Alonso de la Vega’s.

11. Abigail Dyer’s interesting study of cases of seduction in the courts of Navarra between 1598 and 1700 does not include information about the social class of the 1,804 litigants she considers. She shows how, although the Council of Trent banned clandestine marriages, women who had sexual relationships with men under promise of marriage did have legal recourse to defend themselves under the law that covered “estupro bajo promesa de matrimonio” (439). Dyer distinguishes between secular courts, which had the power to sentence defendants to corporal punishment, including the death penalty, and ecclesiastical courts, which held power over whom the defendant married. Until social class is factored into such analyses, it is not known when—if ever—noblewomen took recourse in either court system in cases of sexual dishonor.
of the dominant group (white, Catholic noblemen) without violating ethical standards. Justice, which according to Langer dominates European narrative through the seventeenth century, is thus a highly appropriate lens through which to examine works by women, because the justice plot sanctions women’s performance of attributes ascribed to men in masculinist formulas. For this reason, it affords an aesthetically and socially acceptable discourse through which women could voice their subjective understanding of their own merit. Reaching beyond patriarchal notions of gender, justice defers to codes of behavior that discriminate less on the basis of sex than on the standards of rectitude that sustain the equality of the female and male soul.

The justice narrative, ruled by principles formulated over generations and thereby collective, does not accommodate individual wants or needs that countermand community standards. It stages an imperative of equalization and responsibility, according to whose mandates the person to whom moral wrong is done has not only the right but the responsibility to see that wrong righted, and then to live with that solution as well as with whatever consequences her or his participation in the disorderly conduct might have produced. The proportion of the wrong committed determines the proportion of the corrective consequences, to which Langer refers as the relational feature of particular justice.

Langer contends that “short narrative prose in the Renaissance provides scenarios of particular justice, in its staging of closure” (317). Many Spanish comedias can be seen as similarly driven, either striving for the accomplishment of justice or rendering ironic the same. The two kinds of particular justice that Langer finds pertinent, distributive and corrective, are distinguished by the former’s power to distribute “honor, wealth, and other goods to members of the community according to their merit,” whereas the latter guarantees “fairness in exchanges of goods between members of the community” (316). These material or abstract goods, unfairly allotted at the play’s beginning, are reapportioned in conformity with moral truth at the play’s

12. Caro’s membership in the dominant social group by virtue of race, religion, and perhaps class mitigated her marginalized status as a woman.
13. In referring to masculinist notions of gender, I share Teresa Langle de Paz’s understanding of these as the “official culture” of the Spanish Golden Age, “la cultura masculinista del siglo XVII, caracterizada precisamente por la dificultad de acoger e integrar un punto de vista abiertamente femenino” (471).
end. In a comedy, the path to retribution is paved with laughter and *enredo*, the ultimate proof of the Golden-Age dramatist’s skill.\(^{14}\) *Enredo* requires the intense crescendo of multiple problems across the plot, culminating in the artful and sudden silencing of them all (Arellano 13–67).

Both distributive and corrective justice are crucial in Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, for example, whose cross-dressed Rosaura is often compared to Caro’s female characters (Carrión; Cortez; Soufas, “Ana”; Weimer). Segismundo is born with a princely identity, violated by his father, which distributive justice requires he recover as his birthright. Corrective justice is observable in the motif of Segismundo’s frustrated attraction to Rosaura, which his regal character, once fully functional, demands that he sacrifice in order to restore her honor and safeguard his own. Whereas his personal desire prompts him to take Rosaura because he wants her, self-control demands that he not do so, in the interest of a larger concern. This virtue finally dominates, and through it Segismundo triumphs (El Saffar 94). Caro’s Leonor proves herself similarly heroic by charging don Juan for the inequity in their relationship, thereby betrothing herself to a less than heroic male but in the process realizing the early modern understanding of justice, drawing a morally fallen nobleman back to the strictures of rectitude whose interests she defends, and in the process correcting don Juan’s signification of her as worthy of abandon.

In this matrix, the objective of the play, and what the public yearned for, was an ending that served up more just deserts than individual gratification, relying on the power of justice to somehow turn wrong into right, efficiently and wittily. Any inequities charged by one character against another had to be equalized in a directly compensatory fashion for justice to be accomplished: a dishonored woman must somehow dishonor the perpetrator of her dishonor, an individual who is robbed must steal from the robber, etc. The final scenes of both *Valor* and *La vida es sueño* symbolically make permanent, through a public rearticulation of a previous betrothal, that which don Juan and Astolfo sought to render temporary. The endings thus assure the performative power of oral contracts and assuage the anxiety produced by the dramatic association of male noblemen with ignoble behavior.

In the case of *Valor*, closure entails seeing Leonor dishonor don Juan as just recompense for his dishonorable behavior, then reconciling him perma-

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\(^{14}\) I find the comic nature of Caro’s play crucial because the control of laughter signals power (Henri Bergson, Wylie Sypher; the essays in Jo Anna Isaak, et al. address the topic in a feminist context). Soufas, in contrast, finds Leonor’s cross-dressing to be serious (*Dramas* 106–07).
nently to the past he disordered. Reinforcing the architecture of justice in the main plot, Caro reiterates the realization of distributive justice in the sub-plot of Tomilho’s frustrated attempt to deflower Flora, using the material artifacts of physical virginity and a bag of coins. Flora enacts particular justice, keeping her virginity and returning tit for tat by deflowering Tomilho of that which is dearest to him, his money, a victory that buttresses Leonor’s larger triumph and follows its retributive trajectory.

As Langer points out, transgression in justice narratives is highly theological in nature: “the disruption of social order takes place so that fairness may be achieved, so that a satisfying ending may occur” (318). In Valor, don Juan transgresses by reneging on his promise to marry Leonor, and the plot is resolved when Leonor has corrected his error by making good on his promise (and hers), whereupon a host of other characters are paired off to reinforce the closure. According to the theological nature of the justice plot and the demands of enredo, don Juan’s burla provides less meaning in itself than the opportunity to display Leonor’s virtuosity, whose function is to restore don Juan to moral integrity, thereby restoring the integrity of the collective whose interests Leonor embodies. The sentimental demands of Caro’s drama, such as the fact that Leonor is an endearing character who deserves a more heroic mate than don Juan, are superseded by the demands of justice. Thus she accepts his hand for the sake of the larger good, in the same heroic spirit with which Segismundo turns Rosaura over to Astolfo.

Leonor’s success is contingent upon her ability to match don Juan’s burlas quantitatively (she tricks him as he did her) and to surpass them qualitatively (she is acting on behalf of good). The play’s meaning lies not in Leonor’s decision to saddle herself with don Juan’s obvious imperfections, but rather in the heroine’s victory and the achievement of what she rightly deserves: to get what she was promised when she trusted don Juan with her honor. Were Leonor to decide that she did not care to marry him after all, realizing that he is a honey-tongued rascal, she would be inconsistent as well as irresponsible for her own initial pledge to him, and thus as weak as he in the play’s moral structure. Within the constraints of the justice narrative, there is nowhere for Leonor to go except to the altar with don Juan. Caro celebrates that constraint by endowing her protagonist with a relentless drive to do precisely that, adding the flourish of don Juan’s own final adoration of Leonor as the proverbial icing on the cake.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Camino finds that don Juan overcomes his narcissism (46).
The only overt symptom of resolution in a justice narrative is a finished, fair exchange, or proportional distribution, which produces the spectators' gratification. "[T]he pleasure of the just resolution is indeed moral without inspiring any other particular virtue or conversion among the listeners"; characters who produce the desired pleasure for the public tend to be cunning or crafty (Langer 319). These powerful individuals are able practitioners of agudeza, or wit, a highly prized feature of Spain's heroic figure during the baroque period. Thus, although Leonor is a morally superior character in that she is faithful to don Juan, she has no qualms about maneuvering him and others into conformity with her position, and her public would have celebrated her witty dexterity because she seeks to right a wrong.

Distributive and corrective dexterity, concerned with what is fair, differ from lawful justice, concerned with what is legal, which figures only laterally into narrative (Langer 315–17). Lawful justice, when invoked at all, is often contrasted with particular justice by satirizing official institutions and those who represent them, as Caro's ironic treatment of the prince exemplifies. According to political theory, Ludovico should be the one to set things aright because he is the socially superior character. In practice, however, he is unable to accomplish anything except arrogance and failure. Caro's refusal to exalt Ludovico as a prince signals her rupture with human, civic standards and her plot's foundation on moral, implicitly divine, authority.

In the service of Leonor's alliance with order, Caro stages her heroine's early relationship with don Juan, in which Leonor is a willing participant, at a temporal and geographic remove from the action represented in the play, disallowing public view of the heroine's flaw: she enters into a compromising union without the sanction of public marriage, ignorant of or oblivious to don Juan's nature. The text is resolutely contradictory about whether their sexual relationship is consummated or not, perhaps because from Leonor's perspective, the physical act is irrelevant given the social reality of her dis-honor (384–90; 1676–79; 2717). Seeking redress of her offense, Leonor justifies her furious indignation over don Juan's betrayal by her membership in the nobility, thereby staking a claim on the distributive justice to which the upper classes had unconditional access. When her servant Ribete suggests that male clothing has given Leonor courage, she retorts asking, "Yo ¿soy quién soy?" (507). As José Antonio Maravall stresses, this classic comedia rhetorical question:

no es un principio que obligue a ser fiel a sí mismo, en el sentido de realizar en sus actos aquel núcleo interno de la propia personalidad [. . .] como un
ser si mismo. Es, por el contrario, [...] el reconocimiento de la obligación de conducirse según el modo que a la figura social de uno le corresponde. (62)

Caro thus establishes an isomorphic relationship between order, or the larger social good beyond the demands of individual desire, and Leonor’s desire, which is to draw the chaotic energy of the burlador into conformity with the community’s paradigm of correct behavior.

Caro’s plot re-forms don Juan in conformity with corrective justice, or the requital of what he gave to Leonor—burla—via the proportional payback of burla to him. The fact that Leonor tricks don Juan into compliance with his own word is thus not the problem; it is the point. In the justice narrative, the structural victory signifies supreme, and the more hyperbolic the enredo through which that victory is realized, the better, even though the process suggests that the protagonists’ marriages will be unstable at best. The union that Caro promises at the end of Valor can disquiet readers today, because by fooling don Juan into marrying her, Leonor manipulates her man rather than winning him “honestly.” According to the logic of justice, however, Leonor wins precisely by not only doing to him exactly what he did to her—trick and thereby drive to despair—but by doing it better, because in the process she hoodwinks him into revealing his enduring feelings for her and relinquishing his practice of faithlessness, a characteristic that all the major characters, including don Juan himself, decry as reprehensible.16

Importantly, the male clothing in which Caro vests Leonor reveals as much as it hides. Striding on stage for the first time, costumed in full male regalia and behavior, Leonor makes a confident announcement to her public: “En este traje podré / cobrar mi perdido honor” (465). The heroine’s language signals immediately, in terms that commodify her honor, that the play has opened with an equation whose parts should total her honor but do not: a man promising to marry plus a woman promising to do the same, raised to the power of consummation, whether social or sexual, should equal marriage. Leonor’s opening line establishes the clear connection between her male disguise and her intention to use it to access the same social and sexual

16. Don Fernando observes that don Juan is “de afable trato, / aunque fácil” (7765–66); Estela enjoins the trickster to better behavior, saying, “don Juan, tened con las damas / más firme correspondencia” (1960–61); don Juan admits, “mi ingratitud me condena” (2468).
economics that don Juan has used to unbalance their equation. Unlike his unbalancing act, hers will strive to restore the originally intended total, rendering the account settled and closed by exacting the promised payment from him. The word “cobrar” is a transactional term that means charging for a debt accrued, as Covarrubias indicates: “recibir la paga de [lo] que se debe” (324a). Leonor responds aggressively to the debt economy into which don Juan has thrust her by refusing to comply with his determination that their relationship is over, and, as she says, her male costume is the tool she will use to recoup her loss by recovering her social integrity.

Becoming Leonardo is precisely what allows Leonor to force her vital mathematics into the equation she needs to survive as an honorable woman in her society. Whereas don Juan could dishonor a woman without paying the consequences, and attempts to do so, he cannot dishonor a high-mimetic nobleman without paying for it, and Leonardo assures that he do precisely that by forcing him into competition for Leonor—all, of course, under the watchful eye of the same woman. The moment of greatest dramatic tension, the moment served by the entire play, is the moment of don Juan’s capitulation to the pressure put on him by Leonardo to turn around and make good on his word to the woman he has abandoned. When Leonardo asks don Juan if he would love Leonor had she not admitted his (Leonardo’s) suit, don Juan enthusiastically affirms, “La adorara” (2670). At this moment, the primary reason for Leonor’s male disguise dissipates, because the settling of the account is assured.

Just as Leonor’s heroic role in the justice plot has two benefits (the realization of justice and a collateral display of female heroism), so her cross-dressing accomplishes her goal of settling the account of her honor as well as other objectives that Caro surely had in mind. A woman who succeeds at her own agenda in men’s clothing gives the lie to the debilitating, reductive standards of sexism more efficiently than the woman who never changes costume. She displays that the perception of others in the production of identity matters as much, if not more, than one’s actual identity, and is what prohibits women from publicly realizing the full spectrum of their virtues and abilities. As Mercedes Maroto Camino suggests in this context, “The concern with dress and appearance conveys the emphasis on the individual’s ability to ‘view,’ to distinguish and thereby classify society according to appearances” (39). When perceived as a man (but always a woman), the heroine gains a means to display what she already has, trespassing on what a
sexist society normatively identifies as male privilege and forcing the naturalization of that privilege for noblewomen and noblemen alike. Caro’s attention to categories of virtue, as keys to identity and the justifiers of privilege, is manifest in how she manipulates the justice plot to ensure the triumph of good, specifically the realization of an unfulfilled promise whose violation compromises Leonor’s entire future. In the service of that future, the dramatist manipulates dramatic tropes of character, only the latter of which are gender-specific, to reinstate the order explicit in Leonor and Juan’s initial pledge to marry. It is helpful in this context to distinguish between tags that dramatists often display on their characters to signify social versus moral attributes. Social attributes are superficial, often material signifiers that intensify rather than move the plot, such as clothing, linguistic registers, and the use of gender-specific props. Moral attributes, in contrast, are enacted narratively, via positive/ethical or negative/unethical behaviors.

Although Leonor has to borrow the superficial, social attributes of masculinity, the features of positive moral attributes are already hers. As Leonardo, she comically performs masculinity’s social attributes to inspire others to read her as male: she wields a sword, swears, enamors a lady (two, counting herself), and dons a codpiece, provoking Ribete to joke about what isn’t behind it. Whereas social attributes can be managed to deceive others about one’s sex, as in the case of the cross-dressed woman, moral attributes hinge on performance rather than appearance and are not gender-specific, and so cannot be manipulated in the same way.

In her moral performance, Leonor remains within the positive attributes common to her society’s constructs of male and female, while ably steering clear of the negative moral constructs of both. As Leonardo, Leonor does not actually kill, but is valiant enough to do so if necessary, negotiating a fine moral line. She is seductive without actually seducing; verbally compelling and witty without actually lying; attractive and courteous, but not sexual; and true to her class. In short, by performing the positive virtues common to man and woman, Leonor frustrates any expectation that the cross-dressed woman will change something more than her clothes upon removing her male costume: in the moral sense of justice, Leonor and Leonardo are identical.

According to the mechanics of justice, Leonor repays burla with burla with

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17. Jeffery C. Persels reveals the aggrandizing function of the codpiece.
an intensity that matches the life-threatening situation in which don Juan’s behavior has left her. This entails somehow balancing the equation that don Juan’s behavior has unbalanced with his dishonesty, to the detriment of his reputation and hers. Caro places the positive force of ethical male behavior in Leonor’s hands as just compensation for don Juan’s attempts to leave her paying for his inconstancy. She builds her text on the assumption that the signifying columns of male and female are both adorned by strength, wit, and potential heroism, features inaccessible to the weak, immoral character of either sex.

Estela confirms this alignment by wearing a skirt throughout the play and performing the same admirable traits as Leonor/Leonardo: the Countess is forthright, witty, and determined, all while dressed in the material signifiers of a woman. She rejects a prince’s suit because she finds him boring, scoffs at her suitors’ hyperbolic love rhetoric, rejects don Juan upon learning of his infidelity to another woman, and claims Fernando as her mate before he dares even to express his desire for her. Estela incarnates the woman’s construct of woman, as does Leonor, and Caro’s representation of other women in the play as virtuous and strong normalizes Leonor’s features. Her remarkable gracioso Ribete is a self-conscious and mimetically superior character (Fox; Kaminsky; Soufas, “Ana”; Williamson). Allowing characters of non-noble class, such as Ribete and Flora, to access morally noble behavior further normalizes Leonor’s heroic stature by increasing the cast of characters who practice virtues that the patriarchy ascribes to noble men.

Caro’s decision to dress her heroine as a man responds to the demands of justice and serves to celebrate her heroine’s performative dexterity. Leonardo, who is a mujer varonil in male attire, is not a tribute to the wonders of manhood but rather to the wonders of Leonor and the moral attributes of the truly noble person. There is evidence that Spanish women authors of the early modern period, from Teresa de Ávila to María de Guevara, found in the mujer varonil a trope of normalization, stabilization, and the recovery of qualities that authors such as Caro celebrate as women’s own.

In the Castillo interior, whose second version Teresa de Ávila wrote some time between 1566 and 1569, the future saint urged her nuns to avoid overly affective expression with each other, insisting, “Es muy de mujeres, y no querría yo, hijas mías, lo fuésedes en nada, no os pareciécedeses, sino varones fuertes; que si ellas [las hermanas] hacen lo que es en sí, el Señor las hará
tan varoniles, que espanten a los hombres” (códice de Valladolid, 7.8).18 One-hundred years later, María de Guevara’s Desengaños de la corte y mujeres valerosas (1664) set forth what Teresa Langle de Paz describes as “una utopía social y moralizante que incluye a la virtud femenina y a la ‘mujer varonil’ como modelos de comportamiento y como partes integrantes y esenciales del orden de las cosas, en una sociedad ideal lejana y perdida o futura o deseada” (465).19 Teresa de Ávila and Guevara’s understanding of the mujer varonil is identical to Caro’s representation of her “manly” women, Leonor, Estela, and Flora: “esto es, valerosas y virtuosas” (Langle de Paz 467).20

Leonor’s male disguise allows her to redress her honor by making it possible for her to approach don Juan as an equal, ironically permitting her to signal the flaw in any understanding of valor and virtue as the patrimony of males. Her witty and extreme behavior signifies, in mimetic opposition, don Juan’s extreme transgression of her rights. Don Juan’s second promise to marry her signifies neither romantic fulfillment nor gender entrapment, but the victory of justice. Leonor is the source of all dramatic energy in the play (Williamson 24) and wields the power of order. Thus she is endowed with the right and responsibility to lead the errant don Juan back to his promise and so back to her. In the process, she will accept as hers the consequences of her initial involvement with him: she will marry him.

The play’s ending proffers final evidence of Leonor’s consistency of character. In the last scene, Caro has her heroine march on stage bedecked as a

18. The Valladolid autograph, so called because it is in the possession of the Carmelite nuns in that city, was the second version of the Camino de perfección that Teresa composed; she is believed to have written the first between 1562 and 1564. This passage is not in the first version, the códice del Escorial.

19. In the cited passage, Langle de Paz is analyzing Guevara’s voice in the querelle des femmes, specifically her response to the tradition of the catalogue of mujeres varoniles. Her edition of Guevara’s text is forthcoming.

20. The term mujer varonil, as well as referring to a stock comedia character, was invoked in the seventeenth century by men and women to describe females whose salient characteristic was bravery on behalf of virtue. For example, in his 1625 treatise La casa de la razón y el desengaño, Mercedarian moralist Alonso Remón apostrophizes to Susana exclaiming, “Oh ejemplar mujer, oh hembra varonil, o matrona constante, o casada, verdadero dechado de casadas, en el peligro, en la ocasión, con amenaza tan fuerte, mujer sola, sin testigos, porfiada de hombres poderosos” (49). The term was useful because the adjective varonil imposed a modifier connoting valor and strength on the noun mujer, without which mujer would not normatively carry that connotation. Teresa de Ávila, Caro, and Guevara suggest, however, that it should.
dama bizarra, not meek and mild, receding into the norms of the patriarchally defined female but continuing to control the word through the final line of the play. Rather than seek forgiveness for having broken with decorum and dressed like a man, as Golden Age damsels are wont to do, Leonor is so bold as to forgive the men standing there for having ever doubted her fidelity to don Juan: “yo os perdono el mal concepto / que habéis hecho de mi amor” (2702–03). When she asks her astounded betrothed if he still loves her, as Dian Fox says, “The manipulator of language par excellence [don Juan] is now virtually speechless. [. . .] To Leonor belongs the lion’s share of [the final] dialogue, and don Juan emits only a stunned ‘Te adoraré’” (44). The flurry of betrothals with which the play ends constitutes the symbolic rendering of what Fernando denominates “tantó bien” (2728), the triumph of justice accomplished by Leonor. Her continued verbal control of the drama through its ending, in spite of her last-minute costume change, signals clearly that her identity is stable beneath her varied wardrobe, that virtue trumps gender, and that justice is blind to it as well. Redressed as a woman, Leonor can claim her victory and marry don Juan.

Marriage is the exact and only solution, structurally and socially, to Leonor’s problem. Similarly, marriage with the man who deflowered her, physically or socially, is the trope that signifies the restitution of a woman’s honor in the eyes of her community, the only guarantor of her membership in that community unstained. It is the most effective manner to signify the merit of a noblewoman whom a nobleman has abandoned, because it invokes a sacrament in which divine power is presumably invested, if not in its assurance of eternal matrimonial harmony, then in its assurance of permanence in the face of changing human emotions.

Teresa S. Soufas convincingly suggests that through Leonor, Caro is not only inverting masculinist dramatic tropes, but also transforming them, using Leonardo to instruct men in correct behavior (“Ana”). Correspondingly, in having her heroine betroth herself again to don Juan, Caro is not enacting the masculinist prescriptive formula according to which woman signifies chastity by virtue of male hegemonic determinations. If, as Catherine Larson has indicated, Caro’s female protagonists are subjects, not objects, then Leonor’s chastity (meaning her fidelity to don Juan) is an act of will, a performance of her high-mimetic standard.21 All internal evidence in the text

21. In her important study of El Conde Partinuplés, Carrión finds that Caro’s textual economy “represents women as subjects who actively read and write marriage as an institution designed to frame them as silent and submissive wives” (242).
affirms Leonor’s understanding of this reiterated betrothal as the solution to her problem. Each promised union of Valor is explicitly represented as mutually desired for one reason or another, and thus together they signify closure in accordance with the play’s own standards. Whether “happily ever after” will transpire is not the concern of the dramatist, who uses the betrothal ending the way a mystery writer uses the solving of the crime: as a signal that the story is finished and the problem solved. The problem in Valor, agravio y mujer is Leonor’s dishonor.

Seeking to marry, Leonor enters not the repressive institution described by male moralists of Caro’s day, but rather the stability, power, and social legitimacy it offered women. As scholars such as Catherine Connor, Lena Cowen Orlin, Georgina Dopico Black (5–6), and Charlene Villaseñor Black convincingly argue, historically marriage was an opportunity for a woman of education and ambition in seventeenth-century Europe:

[J]ust as we should not assume that a comedia heroine’s subversions end in a monolithically controlled marriage state—a judgment more modern than early modern—neither should we assume that the social controls of marriage that appear severely limiting to our eyes did not contain their own potential for a variety of conditions and actions, including subversion. [. . . ] The married state in early modern Spain, in all its particular variations, was the most commonly desired one for most women because it was the legal structure offering the greatest potential for economic, social, cultural, and political security. (Connor 36)

Marriage endowed women with authority, legitimacy, and mobility unavailable by any other means, a legitimacy that allowed them to exercise their subjective identity in the broadest context possible.

For the woman who seeks it, a marriage commitment is the surest signifier of triumph and merit in the social economy of baroque Spain. Caro’s authentication of the cross-dressed mujer varonil and the marriage syntax as legitimate female resources suggests that both not only complement, but also comprise her heroine’s interests in their fullest realization, allowing her to see justice done.

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