

By Fan or By Sword:

Cross Dressing in Golden Age Theatre as a Means of Social Resistance By Female

Playwrights of the Era

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Writers of the Golden Age of Spanish Literature had very little freedom with their creativity in terms of social and moral issues and were often heavily censored. In particular, gender roles were to be accepted unquestioningly. The unwritten rule was applied even more stringently to woman authors of the period, who were already frowned upon for writing at all during an age when it was believed that women should not be educated. Often, the taboo subject of gender roles was referred to using comedy and double entendre. Since gender roles were so very well defined in society, attention was immediately drawn to any deviation from said norms. Perhaps due to such severe restrictions, cross-dressing became a popular device for literary works and conceivably even a tool for pushing the boundaries of these gender role restraints.

Cultural gender ideals for men and women were very separate, rigid and very well defined. Any overlap or fluidity was severely frowned upon. Gender was, and remains, a divisive principle and has always been widely used as a tool for subjection. Societal order during the Golden Age hinged on the sexes obeying the unwritten rules assigned to them. However, gender roles in literature were somewhat more malleable in that characters dressed as the opposite sex were able to behave in a manner befitting their disguise. For example, a cross-dressed woman was able to move about in public during a time when women, even nuns, were not allowed to appear in public without an appropriate escort. A cross-dressed woman was also

able to illustrate the ideal man in contrast with the typical man who was, in reality, far from that ideal. The use of a man dressed as a woman illustrated not only the outrageous lengths women were forced to go to in order to fulfill the ridiculous expectations men imposed on them, but also the foolishness of the men who loved the illusion of beauty that women were forced to create. Male characters disguised as a women were able to gain the trust of an unsuspecting female character and gain access to her without an escort. In these respects, one can understand why cross-dressing in theatre served as a very dangerous threat to the establishment, since acting on stage is so similar to the sustained social performance needed to create gender reality. A person acting in a manner opposite to his or her societal role creates liberal ideas, even when that person is simply a seemingly insignificant character in a play. Culturally imposed gender roles were more and more threatened, as each out-of-character act was performed, poking holes in the already thin veil that presented those roles as unalterable.

I will present examples of the way in which María de Zayas y Sotomayor, Ana Caro Mallén de Soto and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz utilized the cross dressing of their characters as a tool in their writing and as a tool to safely, and subtly, criticize the restrictions placed upon them. During the period in which these female authors wrote, it was solely men that occupied the public realm, women had no place in public life and had no voice in matters outside the home and only rarely was their voice heard even within the home. A woman's honour was very fragile, easily tarnished, and so, to safeguard against unfounded blemishes on her honour, and by extension her family's honour as well, women were not allowed to leave their house unless accompanied by a male member of the family. They were to remain either confined in their house or cloistered in the convent. As a result many women did not spend very much time at all

outside of the home, except, of course, to go to church. Many women, no doubt, found this restriction suffocating. Often in order to preserve honour, to carry out secret plans or simply to advance the plot, authors enabled their female characters to move about in this male-dominated world by disguising them as men. A woman who found herself outside of the home without a proper escort and without being disguised as a man was in a very dire situation indeed.

Due to the severe restrictions placed upon them, women of the time were very much at the mercy of the men in their lives. As a reflection of this aspect of life, literature often portrayed men that took advantage of this power. In her work, *The Enchantments of Love*, María de Zayas y Zotomayor writes of a character named Jacinta who fell victim to one such man. Jacinta explains her situation saying that the traitor who guided her took the road to Barcelona and not the road to Salamanca as she had paid him to do. He then stole everything she had and she was abandoned there in the open country all by herself. Not only did this betrayal put an unaccompanied woman's honour in serious jeopardy but left her in a terribly dangerous situation given that she had no experience trying to function in anyway in daily affairs. Cross-dressing offered this female character, her only method of interacting in society without a man, and allowed her time to consider her situation. Jacinta relates that she bought men's clothes, cut her hair and, in her disguise, came to Montserrat to pray and when the priests offered her a job shepherding their flock on the mountain she accepted and lived alone for months in the wild. This character would not have been able to travel alone without her disguise. Zayas shows that her character is not only able to cope with being stranded in unfamiliar surroundings, but as long as she is dressed as a man, she is also capable enough to live in the mountains of Montserrat for four months and indeed indefinitely when she decides that she does not want to return to her

home and the shame and embarrassment that she would face there. With the character of Jacinta, the author is able to show that women are fully capable of functioning in the male world, while preserving their honour, and simply being dressed as a man allows these female characters to do so.

Honour was an all-encompassing aspect of life in this time, second only perhaps to piety. Ana Caro Mallén de Soto, an incredibly pious woman, tells the story of a woman who dresses as a man in order to restore her tarnished honour in the play, *Valor, Outrage and Woman*. The character Doña Leonor has been wronged by the inconstant Don Juan and adopts the male role (a man named Don Leonardo) in order to punish Don Juan and restore her honour by killing him in a duel. She vows that dressed as a man she will be able to restore her lost honour. Through the course of the play, not only is Ana Caro able to recover her character's lost honour and have her happily married by the last scene, but also to poke fun at the honour code itself. At one point in the play the only way for everyone's honour to remain unscathed is for the affected characters to all kill one another. After weighing the options one of the characters, Don Fernando, declares, "[t]his is the solution: we must all kill each other; I can find no other remedy" (343). Clearly this is a ridiculous solution and the fact that it is the only solution that the honour code offers hopefully induces the audience to question the wisdom and the validity of such a code. It is interesting that the way in which the characters are all saved from death is by Doña Leonor readopting her female role. It is unusual in such a male dominated society, that in this play it is a woman who restores everyone's tarnished honour.

In such a patriarchal time, gender identities for both men and women were of course fashioned by men. It becomes very ironic then that women dressed as men were frequently better at filling the male gender role than the men were themselves. Again the character of Doña Leonor/Don Leonardo serves to illustrate this point when Estela spurns the love of Don Juan due to her affection for Don Leonardo who is in fact Doña Leonor. Estela falls in love with him/her for demonstrating the characteristics that every woman desires in a man. There is also a blurring of the gender norms in that this woman is able to duel. Her disguise should not affect her abilities and yet she is able to duel quite competently with Don Juan. It is a beautiful irony that Doña Leonor proves herself to be more of a “man” than Don Juan himself. Don Juan being the gentleman whose unmanly actions, for example seducing her and then leaving, forced her to take up the deception in the first place. This story line is a prime example of how cross-dressing aided a female author in supplying a hidden moral lesson directed at men in her writing.

Cross dressing appeared in many Golden Age plays, and in many different situations. Obviously cross-dressing occurred in one of two ways, either in a female character dressed as a man or a male character dressed as a woman. It seems that in both cases the disguise allows characters to act out behaviours that they would otherwise need to repress. While women dressed as men in comedies were used as a tool to show women’s strengths, and men dressed as women in comedies often illustrated men’s unrealistic views of women, sometimes men dressed as women in drama served to illuminate men’s darker side. Having looked at female characters we shall now consider the disguised male character in the examples of the fool and the dishonoured brother.

In literature, the rules of conduct are more relaxed for the character of the fool. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz takes advantage of this role relaxation in her play *The House of Trials*. The fool, Castaño, behaves very much outside of the conventional male gender role. He proves that he is not at all brave as a man should be; he is afraid to be discovered by the police and afraid to disobey his master's bidding and so dresses as a woman to hide his identity. As Castaño dresses himself in women's clothing he transforms himself into his own ideal of femininity, he even preens in front of the audience, commenting on his appearance and charms, and makes fun of young men who love not for beauty but for what they think beauty is. Sor Juana has used Castaño's disguise to comment on both the male ideal of a beautiful woman as well as on male vanity. In his *Feminist Interpretation of the House of Trials*, David Pasto explains that he feels the character of Castaño, the fool dressed as a woman, also serves the purpose of punishing Don Pedro's character for his objectification of women. The object of Don Pedro's affection is not really a woman at all but Castaño disguised in Doña Leonor's clothing. In traditional Golden Age Literature, the female characters often serve as objects of male desire rather than standing on their own as characters in their own right. Sor Juana uses this character not only to demonstrate that men do in fact act outside the gender norm but also to illustrate a flaw in the gender norm itself. She is able to subtly mock the misogynistic treatment of women by using cross-dressing as well as the dramatic convention of the fool character.

The character of the dishonoured male shows how social convention was so thoroughly ingrained into the population that legal infractions were often glossed over. This is especially apparent in crimes against women. This is sometimes referred to as the concept of female expendability. Many critics believe that Zayas wrote her novellas in order to attack the

misogynistic treatment of women, in an attempt to reach beyond the fiction to expose the hidden domestic tragedies that patriarchal societies have silenced throughout the centuries. In Zayas' third disenchantment we see how cross-dressing aids men in their nefarious desires. "Most Infamous Revenge" is the story of a noble and beautiful woman, Octavia, who is seduced by a dishonest man who promises marriage with no intention of honouring his promise. When he marries another, Octavia is enraged and calls on her brother to avenge her honour and by extension, his own that has been damaged by this turn of events as well. The brother does so by dressing as a woman in order to gain access to the new wife's apartment, where not only does he threaten her life but forcibly rapes her. The poor woman's trials do not end there. Her husband blames her for what he feels is *his* dishonour and upon his return home he slowly poisons her to death. This is a particularly tragic example of the honour code's twisted logic and of male cruelty towards, and the victimization of, the women of this era. Zayas uses the gender deception in this instance not only to further the plot but also to chastise men for their stubborn pride. This type of behaviour was unfortunately far too common in a society in which convention and decorum were so highly regarded that they were maintained at any cost.

Gender roles in literature were manipulated by many female authors as their only means to subtly and safely speak out against the mistreatment they so often encountered. It is unfortunate that the role created for men so casually included an inherent devaluation of women. The fact that gender ideals for men and women were simply constructs is illustrated by characters dressed as the opposite sex, since they are able to act in a manner befitting their disguise and not their sex. These characters can be seen not only as an admonishment to men but

as a rally cry to women, a commentary on the ludicrous practices perpetuated for the sake of tradition, convenience and control.

María de Zayas y Sotomayor, Ana Caro Mallén de Soto and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz were just three of the female authors of the Golden Age of literature who were able to blur the rigid lines that prevented any fluidity or overlap between the gender roles. While the parody of these gender norms is not in itself subversive, the repetition of gender norm blurring and overlap can be disruptive and can produce a reconsideration of the permanence of the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Stability in society was maintained by not allowing people to reconsider their roles. Cross-dressing in theatre encouraged liberal thinking, perhaps even the questioning of the status quo and thus was indeed a very dangerous threat to the establishment. The possibility of the destabilization of the social order was not enough to silence authors, and in fact encouraged many who were limited by the cultural norms. Literature continues to this day, to question traditionally imposed gender roles. The only question remaining is: Will authors have their characters fight the establishment by fan or by sword?

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