

## COUNTER/ACTING THE BODY POLITIC: LEONOR DE LA CUEVA'S *LA FIRMEZA EN LA AUSENCIA*

CONTRARRESTANDO/ACTUANDO EL CUERPO POLITICO EN *LA FIRMEZA EN LA AUSENCIA* DE LEONOR DE LA CUEVA

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### **Abstract:**

Although women protagonists in male-authored Spanish *comedias* were cast in pivotal roles, they remained as objects for which the male protagonists competed and contended. It has not been until recently that women playwrights have been studied by feminist critics, who have shed light on the reestablishment of the relational union of men and women. Nonetheless, while these female-authored *comedias* counter male authority, they often seemed to act out the part of the patriarchy. My analysis of Leonor de la Cueva's *La firmeza en la ausencia* intends to measure the impact of women's destabilizing force as it is introduced and asserted in the play.

Through the female protagonist's constancy, Cueva's play counters the political authority as it is represented by the male protagonists—her king, her lover, and her lover's friend. Moreover, in its geopolitical proximity to Cueva's own time, the play acts out its realism, inverting the male-authored *comedia's* motifs of honor, homosocial bonding, and mirror of princes. In the end, it is her body that disrupts the political and moral order, acting as both destabilizing factor and catalyst that calls the political body to order, and that is itself mirrored in the body of the text as poetic difference.

**Key words:** Leonor de la Cueva; *La firmeza en la ausencia*; Spanish comedia; Women playwrights; Female protagonists; Feminism

**Resumen:**

A pesar del rol esencial de las mujeres en la comedia, las protagonistas han permanecido en la sombra, como objetos por los cuales competían y luchaban los hombres. Recientemente, la crítica feminista ha estudiado a las dramaturgas, iluminando el re-establecimiento en su obra del acercamiento relacional entre hombres y mujeres. Sin embargo, mientras las comedias escritas por mujeres se oponen a la autoridad masculina, parecen actuar de parte del patriarcado. Mi análisis de *La firmeza en la ausencia* de Leonor de la Cueva pretende medir el impacto de la fuerza desestabilizadora de la mujer tal como se introduce y se desarrolla en la obra.

Es a través de la constancia de la protagonista que la obra contrarresta la autoridad política representada por los protagonistas masculinos. Su acercamiento geopolítico a la época histórica de la dramaturga acentúa su realismo, invirtiendo a la vez los temas usuales de los comediantes, como son la honra, la vinculación masculina, y el *speculum principis*. Al final, el cuerpo de la protagonista desvertebra el orden político y moral al actuar como factor desestabilizador y el catalizador que re-ordena el cuerpo político, y que, a su vez, es reflejado en el texto en su diferenciación poética.

**Palabras clave:** Leonor de la Cueva; *La firmeza en la ausencia*; comedia; Teatro Siglo de Oro; Dramaturgas; Protagonistas mujeres; Feminismo

To write on women writers means to *right* women writers, that is, to extend to them their historical merit and their proper place within the canon so their discourse may counteract male entitlement and hierarchies of power. To be sure, recent feminist scholarship has increasingly given women writers their just due, publishing and incorporating their work in courses.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, even the most well-known women playwrights tend to be dismissed in histories of Spanish theater, and their biographies are still incomplete. As an example, of the playwrights Ana Caro, Leonor de la Cueva, Feliciano Enríquez de Guzmán, and María de Zayas—only Caro's *loas* are mentioned in Ignacio Arellano's second edition of his authoritative *Historia del teatro español del siglo XVII* (2002). Besides, while we know, for instance, that Ana Caro de Mallén and María de Zayas earned an income from their writings and are thus considered the first professional women writers, we do not know whether their

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1 Publications on works by women—from poetry to drama—are too abundant to list here; see *The Routledge Research Companion to Early Modern Spanish Women Writers*, For an ongoing data base on early modern Spanish women writers, see BIESES (Biblioteca de Escritoras Españolas).

plays were staged, and we have far too little information about their—and other women writers'—lives, such as their marital status, place of birth, dates of birth or death (Vollendorf 74-75). Leonor de la Cueva y Silva (1611?-1705), whose only play I analyze in this article, similarly had remained little known to scholars; thanks to Sharon Voros's investigations, we are now informed that she was also highly cultured and married, challenging the notion that women writers tended to lead single lives or, as in Spain, were usually cloistered in a convent (Voros 2009, 521-34).

Theater's popularity in the early modern period no doubt attracted literate women who wished to participate in cultural activities, and of the various literary genres that writing women engaged in, plays in particular offered more flexible subject positions from which to respond to the manipulation of the feminine generally emplotted by male playwrights.<sup>2</sup> We are familiar with the feminine archetypes proposed by the conventional *comedia* canon, such as Tirso's *mujeres esquivas* and Calderón's murdered wives, and also with the many feminist analyses that have liberated the characters from normative interpretations of early modern women's oppression. Melveena McKendrick (1974), famously argued that early modern Spanish drama focuses frequently on women who reject marriage as their social role while P.W. Bomli's study on cross-dressed women also noted women's attempts to distinguish themselves through their actions. The numbers of studies of female protagonists in male-authored *comedias* indeed show us that the playwrights themselves saw an opportunity for empathetic, if not outright feminist, representations (See MacCurdy 244-65 and Cruz 69-77). Even when women are cast in pivotal roles in the plays, however, too frequently their main function in male-authored plays aims to serve as the background for and against which the male protagonists compete and contend. As increasingly more female-authored plays come to the fore, therefore, the question of women's agency as represented by women becomes urgent.

In her book *Dramas of Distinction*, the study that, together with her edition of five women playwrights, *Women's Acts: Plays by Women Dramatists of Spain's Golden Age*, brought this and four other female-authored plays to light in Anglo-American scholarship, Teresa Soufas comments that the “[female] characters’ efforts move them and their male companions toward a reestablishment of the relational union of men and women, which in turn re-essentializes the gendered norms and their basis in class hierarchies and privilege” (1997a, 36). Women playwrights attempt to reinstate women's social import by expressing their concerns through the voice and agency of their protagonists, yet, while these female protagonists recurrently counter male authority, they often seem to act out the part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Although considered a *comedia palatina*, the play may never have been staged but instead read in an academy.

patriarchy. In re-appropriating their textual and sexual bodies, the women in female-authored *comedias* thus appear to merely reaffirm conventional feminine roles. As Soufas admits, however, the *comedia* demonstrates “the inability of society to maintain without effort and insistence the fixed status of women.” (1997a, 20). For this reason, the manner in which women’s destabilizing force is first introduced and asserted, even if it may then be rendered ineffectual, requires that we measure its impact on their plays’ meaning. Most recently, feminist critics have argued that the women protagonists of female-authored plays “act with significant agency, complexity, and dimensionality” (Romero-Díaz and Vollendorf 1). Indeed, in her comprehensive analysis of women playwrights, Amy Williamsen makes clear that Soufas’s women playwrights all challenge artistic and social conventions, calling attention to and questioning the intersectional elements of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, class status, and religion, among others (Williamsen 188).

Of the plays written by the five playwrights, two—Ana Caro’s *El conde Partinuplés* and Leonor de la Cueva’s *La firmeza en la ausencia*—assume a critique of political authority. Soufas astutely notes that the plays do not promote revolutionary change; instead, they attempt to reveal the inadequacy of “a discursive field incorporating dialectical images and practices generated by social and political institutions that promoted the predominant definitions of appropriate gendered behavior” (1997a, 32). However, Caro does so obliquely by basing her play on the anonymous French medieval chivalric novel of the same title; following the conventional distancing technique often practiced in the Spanish *comedia*, the plays’ protagonists are allegorized as the empress of Constantinople and a count of France. This is not to say that the play does not grant agency to its female protagonists, although its subversive intent continues to be debated by critics (Maroto Camino 199-216). By contrast, Cueva y Silva’s play is situated in Naples, which was ruled as a vice royalty of Spain from 1503 to 1707. Moreover, one of the play’s protagonists, the king of Naples, Filiberto, may have been named after Philibert of Chalon, viceroy of Naples, from 1528 to 1530. By pointing out these similarities, I do not claim that Cueva is writing a historical play, even though her description of the battle simulates the so-called Italian wars when Naples was besieged several times. The anachronistic use of history is evident in that, according to Alexander Samson, the play dramatizes the rivalry between France and Spain, with Don Juan modeled after Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the Gran Capitán, as he repels the French invasion of Naples in 1503. However, the Italian wars continued throughout the first half of the sixteenth century; the historical Philibert was named viceroy as a result of the siege of Naples (168). What she accomplishes through the play’s geopolitical proximity to her own time and ethos is to reinforce the drama’s realism and the characters’ emotive responses, in particular, that of the leading female protagonist.

Structured as a three-act tragicomedy, Cueva's play incorporates several early modern themes, principally the motifs of honor, homosocial bonding, and mirror of princes. The playwright, however, cleverly inverts each to counter and respond to male-authored plays on the same themes by granting primacy to its female protagonist: the *firmeza* or constancy of the title exalts her key virtue. Filiberto, the king of Naples, has fallen passionately in love with Armesinda, his sister, the Infanta's lady-in-waiting. He decides to send her lover Don Juan off to war against France so he may court the young woman at his leisure and pleasure. Seemingly establishing a dramatic antithesis, Don Juan, aware that the king has plotted the move, complains bitterly about the king's strategy to his best friend, Carlos. Yet, since he doubts Armesinda will remain faithful to him, he beseeches his friend to protect her from the king's predation:

D. JUAN. [U]n consuelo me ha quedado,  
fundado, Carlos, en vos:  
el amigo sois más caro;  
yo os dejo por otro yo  
para que, Argos vigilante,  
con más ojos que el pavón  
guardéis la prenda que adoro  
de este tirano rigor (l. 299-306).<sup>3</sup>

Frustrated by the young women's rejection, however, the king engages his sister and Carlos in an unrelenting campaign to seduce her. Both her mistress and—in a surprising twist to the male bonding motif, which typically tests male friendship—her lover's best friend both aim to convince Armesinda of Don Juan's perfidy so she will succumb to the king's power and attraction. The pressure put upon the young woman to give in to Filiberto's desire becomes the crucible that tempers her resolve: Armesinda's *firmeza* never wavers, even when she believes herself wronged by the three persons to whom she owes allegiance and whom she most cherishes: her king, her mistress, and her lover.

Armesinda's unflagging determination to remain faithful to Don Juan upends the traditional misogynist notion that woman's moral frailty makes her more susceptible than men to temptation. And since she is an orphan dependent on her mistress's care and charity, it is not solely Armesinda's gender, but her precarious family circumstances that make her an unlikely rebel in the court's hierarchically ordered society. Yet the young woman proves that she is far better able than the play's male characters to withstand uncertainty and danger. In this, Cueva is not merely parroting the *querelle des femmes'* protofeminist side, as Arme-

3 All quotations from Cueva's play are from Soufas's edition (1997b).

sinda is well aware that inconstancy is not solely a woman's weakness:

ARMESINDA. Mal ha dicho quien ha dicho  
que la mudanza se engendra  
solamente en las mujeres,  
por su femenil flaqueza (II.1169-1172).

Citing nine classical examples of female constancy lauded for their faithfulness, she asserts that she is superior to them, as she is not weighed down, as they are, with any obligation to a husband, either as a wife or widow.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, her steadfastness in love contrasts markedly with Carlos's hazardous friendship with Don Juan. The king's passion has placed her lover's companion in an untenable position: as subject, he must obey his monarch's desire, but as friend, he is expected to defend Don Juan's honor:

CARLOS. [M]as si soy amigo honrado,  
¿cómo puedo hacer que rinda  
su amor al rey Armesinda,  
habiéndomela encargado?  
Yo soy amigo leal  
y soy vasallo del rey.  
Su obediencia es justa ley,  
e impedir también el mal  
de mi amigo. ¿Hay pena igual? (I.930-939).

Carlos finds a way to solve this dilemma, the labyrinth, as he calls it, by accepting the king's mandate, but at the same time, he must justify his betrayal to his friend by deeming it a means to test and ascertain Armesinda's faithfulness. As is usual in cases of male friendship, the two men place all accountability on the woman.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, Don Juan himself had begun to doubt Armesinda's love on his departure from Naples. His soliloquy describes his soul as a battlefield wherein his love for Armesinda and his fear of her abandonment struggle for dominance:

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4 Cueva lists the following names: Artemisia, Julia, Annia romana, Pantea, Lecostene, Porzia, Aria, Isicratea, and Valeria. She follows with the statement "Y bien puedo yo contarme / por más constante que éstas, pues amo, mas sin tener / las obligaciones que ella" (vv. 1177-1184). Robert Lauer gives the sources of most of these names as reiterated in the various catalogs of famous women, such as Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (91-95). However, Lecostene, is actually a misreading of a man's name by Alonso de Villegas (in his *Fructus Sanctorum y quinta parte de Flos sanctorum, que es libro de exemplos*), of St. Jerome's *Against Jovinianus*, which reads: "The virgin daughter of Demotion, Chief of the Aeropagites [. . .] had given her heart to Leosthenes," (Book I, 41) a Greek warrior.

5 The most well-known test case in Spanish literature is, of course, Cervantes's "El curioso impertinente" in *Don Quixote*. (For its homosocial aspects, see among others, Wilson 9-28; R. Ellis 171-79 and J. Ellis 35-42).

D.JUAN. Sosegaos, sospechas mías;  
no os alteréis, pensamientos;  
dormid seguros, cuidados;  
dejadme un poco, desvelos.  
Mas ¡ay! que es fuerte enemigo,  
flaco el muro de tu pecho,  
la ausencia, de amor contraria,  
y que es mujer considero (I.741-748)

Don Juan cannot take leave of the thought that, as a woman, Armesinda will fall prey to the king's power. He reminds himself that he must be watchful, yet throughout his long absence, he apparently never writes her, prejudging her inconstancy by assuming that she has fast forgotten him. Armesinda, however, responds vehemently in a long lament to the lie that Carlos, obliged to obey the king, had spread of Don Juan's betrothal to another woman:

ARMESINDA. ¿Qué he de tener, que no sea  
ansias, tormentos, enojos,  
iras, venganzas, afrentas,  
desdichas, desconfianzas,  
desesperaciones, penas,  
que como enemigos fieros  
para matarme me cercan?  
[...]  
ni los rigores de ausencia,  
ni el amor del rey bastaron  
a hacer en mi pecho niebla,  
un despecho y un olvido  
fueron la mina soberbia  
que aquel hermoso edificio  
de mi amor deshecho en piezas  
arruinar, Carlos, pudieron (II.1066-1099).

Of the two lovers, then, Armesinda is clearly the moral superior; her exemplary conduct sets the standard for ethical behavior throughout the plot.

Cueva's play is not, however, merely a clever feminist reversal of the cliché that women, by their nature, are fickle, nor, as has most recently been argued, does it propose Armesinda as

an exemplar of a virago.<sup>6</sup> Its critique of kingship allows the play to extend beyond the *comedia de enredo* and male-female relationships, as one of its functions, as Robert Lauer titles his article on this same play, is that of *speculum principis*.<sup>7</sup> The typology of these plays has been studied by numerous scholars, among them, Melveena McKendrick (2000) and, most recently, Jodi Campbell (3), who views them as sources of how Spaniards experienced and perceived political changes, and Alban Forcione (31), who stresses Golden Age playwrights' concern for humanizing the king. While these scholars focus mainly on the *comedias* staged in public theaters or *corrales*, plays staged at court were meant to send an immediate message to their royal audiences. They functioned as a mirror that reflected the king's gaze, redirecting it from the stage to his own persona. Playwrights could thus more effectively critique and correct real monarchical figures through the simulacra of the court on stage. As Campbell puts it, drama, as a mirror for the reigning prince, intended to teach the principal lesson that "kings needed to dominate their personal weaknesses as men in order to fulfill well their duties as monarchs" (2). Cueva's play lends itself to such an ethically edifying function, since the Neapolitan king dangerously resembles an early modern monarch whom the audience might anticipate as their own.

Yet, while in the majority of kingship plays the female protagonists are restricted to moving the plot forward, remaining as passive objects of desire, in her own play, Cueva does not fail to give Armesinda center stage. The young woman, despite her inferior status at court, undauntingly affirms and sustains her desire—her love for Don Juan—even against worsening odds. By contrast, as his passion is continuously rebuffed by Armesinda's devotion to Don Juan, the king degenerates into a potential rapist and murderer. Filiberto had earlier revealed his troubled state to his sister:

REY. No estoy, Celidaura, en mí;  
 quiero y amo con exceso  
 aquesta ingrata hermosura,  
 origen de mi locura,  
 pues por ella pierdo el seso;  
 tengo un desvanecimiento  
 dentro de mi fantasía  
 y una rebelde porfía  
 que no admite rendimiento (l.516-524).

6 See, for example, Lauer, who claims that Armesinda behaves simultaneously like a traditional woman and like a man, as she reveals her masculinity impelled by humoral theory (while her tears are feminine, her temperament is sanguine and therefore masculine), and by the zodiac signs of Libra and Scorpio (95). While I appreciate his synthesis of the *querelle des femmes*, his emphasis on Armesinda's "hibridez" robs her of true agency. He also attributes the king's degeneracy to humoral theory, thus assigning both their actions to external, uncontrollable forces.

7 Lauer's subtitle, "de profeminismo a *speculum principum*," would seem to privilege the latter as the play's main structural theme.



By dramatizing the king's tyrannical comportment, the play is a reminder to all spectators that a king's private persona, his human nature, should behave in accord with the requirements of his public persona. In a study of *La estrella de Sevilla*, McKendrick succinctly challenges the association of the king's body with divine powers and the notion of the king's "two bodies," famously analyzed by Ernst Kantorowicz:<sup>8</sup>

Central to the play's formulation of the problem is the question of the prince's two identities: not the contemporary conception of the monarch as being human by nature and divine by grace—this was not an idea promoted by Spanish political philosophy—nor the bizarre English concept of the king's two bodies, the body natural and the body politic, for which Spanish political thought offered no exact parallel either terminologically or conceptually, but the play between the private and the public person based on the perception that the king was human by nature but suprahuman by role [...]. [T]he conflict between personal desires and princely responsibility, all are recurrent themes in the *comedia*, inspired to a large extent of course by contemporary concerns about Spain's own monarchs (1996, 81) .

The king's increasing desire for Armesinda equals his excessive appropriation of power: as we have seen, he not only exiles Don Juan from court into the battlefield, but soon orders Carlos to betray his bond of friendship by lying to Armesinda that Don Juan has married. From the first, the king's amoral behavior, stating that the sole law he obeys is that of his pleasure—"que al fin es rey / y no está sujeto a la ley; / solamente guarda una. / [...] / La del gusto" (I.510-514)—will be compared to Armesinda's courageous moral outrage. Filiberto's overt seduction of Armesinda begins in Act II, where first her mistress, then the king press her into considering marriage. On her rejection, Filiberto threatens he will kill Don Juan:

REY. Determínate al momento,  
que ya esa altivez me ofende,  
a quererme, que, si no,  
a don Juan he de matar (II.1443-1446).

Although Armesinda believes Don Juan has already married, on hearing that the king not only threatens to kill him, but her also, she vacillates between saving his life by accepting the king's proposal and remaining faithful to her ungrateful lover. Her lengthy soliloquy—over five hundred lines and which I discuss later—rationally weighs her feelings for him against his betrayal, reaching the turning point on her decision to call on love to reinforce her constancy.

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8 For more on Kantorowicz's notion as applied to Spanish theater, see also Quintero 28.

Realizing that he cannot weaken Armesinda's resolve, the king plots callously to rape Armesinda, describing the act in military terms as a royal enterprise:

REY. Esto, Carlos, ha de ser.  
 Amor se ha vuelto porfía.  
 Yo la tengo de gozar.  
 Basta ser empresa mía  
 para acabar de intentar  
 derretir nieve tan fría (III.1706-1711).

When the king learns that Don Juan will soon return to Naples, Carlos suggests that he lie to Armesinda announcing his death in battle. The false news spurs her to recount her emotional history; she relives her suffering, lamenting her losses: what she believes to be Don Juan's neglect of her, his marriage to another, and his final abandonment in death. Yet, when she reiterates her enduring faithfulness and love despite his death, and begs the king on her knees to send her to a convent, he lunges at her, threatening he will take her by force if she refuses his advances:

REY. Mis brazos son la respuesta.  
 Mi esposa has de ser.  
 [...]
 Dame aquesa mano, acaba,  
 O tomaréla por fuerza (III.2122-2130).<sup>9</sup>

Armesinda has the final word, however, as she swears she will kill herself before changing her mind: "ARMESINDA. Daréme mil puñaladas/ Antes que este intento mude" (III.2131-2132).

Stymied by Don Juan's victorious arrival, the king's cowardly assault reinforces Armesinda's moral strength, which she verbalizes through the violent image of self-immolation, and which in turn parallels her lover's military valor. Since Filiberto's desire for Armesinda disrupts the political and moral order, her body acts both as the destabilizing factor and the catalyst that calls the king to order.<sup>10</sup> Don Juan returns from battle with a truce from the king of France in exchange for his sister, doña Blanca's marriage to Filiberto, and the Infanta's marriage to the French king. The play's denouement, therefore, solves the play's political

9 For Stacey Aronson, the attempted rape is a sign of the "institutionalization and normalization of male dominance and female victimization." She concludes that Armesinda is, in the end, saved by Don Juan, "reinscribing her in a traditional female role" (141-52; 149). For a similar interpretation, see Sharon Voros (1998).

10 It is clear that the king's intention is to force Armesinda to marry him. Had he done so, however, peace would never have been restored through the double wedding of his sister, the Infanta, with the French king, and his own wedding with the French king's sister, doña Blanca.

dilemma by ensuring peace and dynastic continuity through the king's marriage, while its honor motif is sustained by Armesinda's marriage to Don Juan in reward for his military valor. Having failed to submit Armesinda to his will through tyrannical means, Filiberto triumphantly overcomes his passion and acknowledges his obligation, not merely to act as a king, but to *be* one:

REY. Hoy aumento mis victorias  
 con ganar la de mí propio,  
 que esto es ser rey y cumplir  
 con el título que gozo,  
 y por premiar un vasallo,  
 matar mi fuego amoroso,  
 pues la hermosura de Blanca  
 tan presto me ha vuelto en otro  
 del que antes era. Armesinda,  
 da a don Juan la mano (III.2384-2393).

The body politic's restoration, however, has been successfully strategized by Armesinda's control of her own physical body, despite the continuous assaults on her honor by the king and the threat to her constancy created by Don Juan's absence. As Soufas (1997a, 43) remarks, female protagonists function as stabilizers of the social order, yet in plays by female dramatists, the protagonists assume sufficient agency with which to achieve this stability. In doing so, they assume far more power than the "respectable *damas*" she invokes. In *La firmeza*, Filiberto confirms Spanish political thought that the king as private individual cannot be separated from the state he embodies. Neither does Armesinda function solely as a private person; indeed, her behavior is as much compromised with the public realm as the king's. It is through her steadfastness that the king remains free to marry the French princess, an ideal social and political match.<sup>11</sup> In her play, Cueva challenges the concept of woman as a private, passive other by reinscribing the female body into social discourse through her actions.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Armesinda's agency inheres textually as well as socially. Her climactic soliloquy at the end of Act II breaks from her dialogues, mainly composed in consonant-rhymed octosyllabic quatrains (*redondillas*).<sup>13</sup> The soliloquy, her longest pronouncement in the play, is

11 The king's attraction to Blanca's beauty ("pues la hermosura de Blanca / tan presto me ha vuelto en otro / del que antes era") reveals how much he still adheres to satisfying his "gusto," incompletely learning the lesson purportedly taught by the play as a *speculum principis*.

12 Gwyn Fox asserts that the female speakers in her sonnets *a petición* "acknowledge their own moral defects, discovered through the *desengaño* engendered by dishonorable male conduct. This realization brings them to a state of independence and freedom" (227).

13 Cueva's excellence as a poet may be corroborated by the collection of poetry in her own hand (Soufas 1997b,

not only distinguished by its content, which elaborates on her turbulent emotions of abandonment and isolation, but by its poetic form. The 115 lines are pronounced in *silvas*, a poetic genre consisting of consonant-rhymed (aabbccdd), 11-11-7-11-7-11-7-11 syllabic lines, which measure the interrupted flow of the varied emotions as she jumps from one thought to another:

ARMESINDA. No sé si muero, cielos, o si vivo,  
 enajenada en mi dolor esquivo,  
 sola entre tanta pena,  
 que estoy de alivio y de consuelo ajena.  
 Don Juan, traidor, casado;  
 el rey de mis desdenes enojado;  
 la infanta desabrida;  
 y yo de todos tres aborrecida (III.1497-1504).

With an atypical rhyme scheme whose pattern repeats only twice, the poem registers her tumultuous emotions, from her self-perception as a small ship tossed about by others' heartless indifference, to the cruel revenge she wishes to inflict on Don Juan for having married someone else. This emotional turmoil leads finally to her admission of her love, despite his absence, and to the dilemma in which she finds herself in fearing his death:

El temor de su muerte  
 entre tantos contrarios es más fuerte.  
 ¿Qué hare? Que estoy dudosa,  
 sin que pueda cuadrarme alguna cosa  
 que traiga mi remedio;  
 [...]  
 Mas, pues falta del cielo  
 remedio, al tribunal de amor apelo;  
 él me le dé, pues es mi resistencia  
 la más rara firmeza en el ausencia (II.1600-1612).

The emotional crisis leads to her self-knowledge: rejecting any externally imposed solution or her own self-destruction—she refuses to flee or commit suicide—or even any spiritual succor, she realizes she must rely solely on her inner strength and love of self to withstand and prevail over the mistreatment received from all those around her.

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196). For an analysis of the play's sonnets, see Fox (237-45).

The insertion of poetic difference into the body of the text, at the play's dramatic moment of anagnorisis, mirrors Cueva's intention to extend women's actions beyond the passive roles to which they are relegated. Armesinda will not remain a sole object of exchange between the king and Don Juan: her constancy is not compelled by any external cause as a mere reaction to the king's tyranny. Rather, it is a decision taken after much introspection of her own emotions and after evaluating the limits of women's roles in early modern Spanish culture. Armesinda's determination to remain faithful to her absent lover comes at a potential cost to her mental and physical welfare. Recognizing that she is in a position to accept or reject the king's advances, Armesinda weighs her options carefully and chooses for herself—a willful action that is crucial to the play's interpretation--despite the consequences that her final choice may have for her. Grounded in her adherence to her own ideals and desires, her resoluteness contrasts with the king's irrational passions, Carlos's traitorous acts, and Don Juan's emotional frailty. Ultimately, Armesinda's constancy stands for much more than her loyalty to Don Juan, whose weakness, like that of the king and Don Juan's best friend, becomes evident to her. It is in the absence of the other characters' virtues that, armed with self-knowledge and self-love, she claims her own *firmeza*.

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