‘Seré lo que tú quisieres’: Female Cross-dressers in Three Comedies by Tirso de Molina

Abstract: This study examines **Tirso de Molina**’s creation of cross-dressed women in three comedies – ***La villana de la Sagra***, ***La mujer por fuerza*** and ***La huerta de Juan Fernández*** – in order to explore the extent to which the dramatist uses the type to broach questions of **sexual ambiguity**. The argument, *pace* some recent scholarship inspired by feminist and psychoanalytic theory, is that Tirso (along with some of his fellow dramatists) used different forms of role-play, including **cross-dressing**, to undermine comically some of the social and behavioural norms of the period but did not prioritize an exploration of sexual ambiguity amongst these.

In the second act of Tirso de Molina’s *El vergonzoso en palacio* (written before 1621), the noblewoman Serafina rehearses her role in a court entertainment she intends to enact in front of her sister, Magdalena. She will play a man, the count Pinabelo, and in costume she practises the part with remarkable brio and authenticity. The scene has been read and admired frequently and scholars’ interpretations of it have helped to reinforce the impression of Tirso as a dramatist who is highly sensitive to human individuality. Jeremy Robbins, for example, believes that her role-play ‘assumes greater depth as it appears that she uses it to express otherwise inexpressible aspects of herself’ and Ursula Heise that, ‘through the detour of male disguise [Serafina] gains access to the power of her own sexuality’.[1] Indeed, Serafina’s

[1] Jeremy Robbins, *The Challenges of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature* (London: Duckworth, 1998), p. 128; Ursula K. Heise, ‘Transvestism and the Stage Controversy in Spain and England’, *Theatre Journal*, 44 (1992), 357-74 (pp. 373-74). See also Jonathan Thacker, ‘Para tiempos de veras / se ejercitan en las burlas’: Some

donning of male clothing allows her to express herself with a freedom she has hitherto lacked and her enthusiastic paean to the theatre is understandable when we witness what role-playing in a 'traje de hombre' (*El vergonzoso*, II, l. 737) does for her.[2] Whether or not the drama's apparently conventional ending would have undermined Serafina's achievement, her newly-configured self, the exuberant rejection of her socially-imposed role cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet.

Though Serafina's motivation for cross-dressing is uncommon (as she has no set goal at the end of it) she is hardly a lone figure. Roughly a quarter of Tirso de Molina's plays feature women who dress temporarily as men in order to disguise their true sex.[3] The

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Uses of Rehearsal on the Golden Age Stage', in *The Routledge Companion to Iberian Studies*, ed. by Javier Muñoz-Basols, Laura Lonsdale and Manuel Delgado (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 226-37 (pp. 229-31).

[2] Quotations from this play are taken from Tirso de Molina, *El vergonzoso en palacio*, ed. by Francisco Ayala (Madrid: Castalia, 1989). (References are to act and line number since the editor numbers lines from the beginning of each act.)

[3] Stoll reckons the transvestite (almost always a woman dressed as a man) features in 21 of the Mercedarian's 84 plays, while Sullivan has the figures as 24 of 88. This means that Tirso is on a par with Lope de Vega in the frequency of his use of the *mujer vestida de hombre*, a character-type not favoured by Calderón, according to Stoll. See Anita K. Stoll, 'Cross-dressing in Tirso's *El amor médico* [Love, the Doctor] and *El Aquiles* [Achilles]', in *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, ed. by Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), pp. 86-108 (p. 86) and Henry W. Sullivan, 'Tirso de Molina: Dramaturgo andrógino', in *Actas del quinto congreso internacional de*

dramatist's predilection for the type, along with his more general tendency to feature strong and complex female characters in his drama, have long been remarked upon by scholars: McKendrick, for example, writes that 'Lope's women have courage, passion, daring and determination but Tirso's have intelligence. If Lope's women rise to the occasion, Tirso's create it'.[4] Sullivan believes that 'su predilección por la figura de la disfrazada' amounts to 'un interés fuera de lo común'.[5] However, while this monk-dramatist's creation of singular female characters, including the myriad women dressed temporarily as men, is indeed worthy of note, scholars have not agreed in their interpretations of all of them. Is Serafina a Tirsian archetype? Is her *esquivez*, even her apparent Narcissism, thus typical of his restless female characters? Should we view her cross-dressing, and desire to keep on her male clothes – 'quiero / vestirme sobre este traje / el mío' (*El vergonzoso*, II, ll. 1050-52) – as the recognition of an alternative, more complex female sexual desire, a feminist instinct *avant la lettre*, or perhaps as evidence of the fluidity of gender boundaries in the period or in general? Do Tirso's plays constitute a challenge to the dominant masculinist ideology through their female characters' unorthodox conduct? Or do they reflect, less radically, the undoubted interest in and anxiety about historically documented 'cross-dressing and ambiguous sexual behaviour' in the period?[6]

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hispanistas, ed. by Maxime Chevalier and others, 2 vols (Bordeaux: Université de Bordeaux, 1977), II, pp. 811-18 (p. 813).

[4] Melveena McKendrick, *Theatre in Spain, 1490-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 116.

[5] Sullivan, p. 813.

[6] The quotation is taken from François Soyer, *Ambiguous Gender in Spain and Portugal: Inquisitors, Doctors and the Transgression of Gender Norms* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 2.

In an article published in 1981, Gail Bradbury explains how the first *comedia* scholars to write on the *mujer varonil* (of which the cross-dressed female is a type) tended to be interested in tracing the literary origins of the figure. It was McKendrick, she notes, who, in 1974, 'convincingly proposed' the existence of 'a closer relationship between the content of these plays and real-life attitudes towards women'.[7] Few today would doubt that the *corrales* reflected life in contemporary Spanish society and influenced it too.[8] However, McKendrick stopped short of associating common *comedia* scenarios such as those, beloved of Tirso (and certainly hinted at in *El vergonzoso*) in which a woman falls for a member of her own sex in male disguise, with 'irregular sexuality', writing: 'I strongly suspect […] that their appeal lay not in their lesbian insinuations but in their dramatic irony'.[9] Bradbury disagreed with

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Soyer documents, in fascinating historical detail, how in the period 'individuals seeking either to fulfil sexual desires or personal ambitions could subvert norms relating to male and female behaviour and appearance' (p. 4).

[7] Gail Bradbury, 'Irregular Sexuality in the Spanish *comedia*', *Modern Language Review*, 76 (1981), 566-80 (p. 566). Elizabeth Lagresa's recent article also examines scholars' changing reactions to the figure of the *mujer varonil* in Golden Age theatre and speculates, with performative theories of gender in mind, as to the relationship between play content and audience interest, 'Monstruos de la naturaleza. Violencia y feminidad en *La varona castellana* de Lope de Vega', *eHumanista*, 17 (2011). ‹http://www.ehumanista.ucsb.edu/volumes/17› [accessed 12 July 2017].

[8] For a discussion of this mutual influence, see Jonathan Thacker, *Role-play and the World as Stage in the* comedia (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002), pp. 1-18.

[9] Melveena McKendrick, *Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 318.

McKendrick, partly on the grounds that the 'available evidence suggests that, for some Spaniards, certain aspects of abnormal sexuality were a source of delight and intrigue, rather than horror or repulsion'. She found that 'in the theatre of Tirso de Molina, particularly, irregular sexuality flourished almost as a theme in its own right'.[10]

Bradbury adduced a good deal of evidence from a variety of contemporary sources, including Huarte de San Juan's *Examen de ingenios,* in making her case which was based on a contemporary openness to biological sexual difference. Since the 1980s, though, and until Soyer's work, scholarship in this area has regularly been influenced by feminist and psychoanalytic theory, rather than following her historicist inclination. And this development has changed radically the way in which strong women and transvestites in Golden Age drama have been viewed and discussed. Thus, it has become commonplace for Tirso's women to be seen as subverting the norm, contributing to his individual (and quite modern) ideas about gender. One focus has been on androgyny: Sullivan, as early as 1977, while admitting that the women in Tirso's plays tend to dress as men in order to 'emprender una caza sexual al revés del género', still glimpsed 'una dimensión erótica de desviación sexual' in the practice. There are lesbian tendencies, he suggests, in the cross-dressed woman's practice of 'el sustituirse por el galán ante la rival misma'.[11] And he concludes that 'los llamados hombres y mujeres de su teatro parecen más bien variaciones sobre un prototipo humano que ni es macho ni es hembra, sino andrógino: una encarnación dionisíaca de la vitalidad';[12] Forbes too felt that the dramatist was focused on the 'male/female distinction, with an eye to questioning its most

[10] Bradbury, p. 569 and p. 567. And, on gender stereotypes and sexual transgressions, see the first chapter of Soyer, pp. 17-49.

[11] Sullivan, p. 813.

[12] Ibid, p. 817.

severe and rigid demarcation' through 'transvestism' and '"abnormal" psychological types';[13] and Donohue is another of the scholars who sees Tirso as deliberately mixing masculine and feminine traits in his cross-dressed women to create androgynous characters.[14]

The popularity of the writings of Judith Butler, notably in her *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990, provided a new theoretical focus for scholars examining women in the *comedia*. Butler's insights that 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' and that its performative character allowed for 'gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality'[15] began to inform *comedia* criticism, notably in Stoll and Smith's *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, published in 2000. The theory was seen to apply to the early-modern period as easily as to the (post-)modern day and allowed the performing women on the Golden Age stage to be seen in a new light: 'cross-

[13] F. William Forbes, 'Tirso and the Feminine', in *Tirso de Molina, vida y obra: Actas del I Simposio Internacional sobre Tirso*, ed. by Josep M. Sola-Solé y Luis Vázquez (Madrid: Revista Estudios, 1987), pp. 111-16 (p. 115).

[14] Darcy Donohue, 'The Androgynous Double and its Parodic Function in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*', in *Tirso de Molina, vida y obra: Actas del I Simposio Internacional sobre Tirso*, ed. by Josep M. Sola-Solé y Luis Vázquez (Madrid: Revista Estudios, 1987), pp. 175-82.

[15] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 140 (emphasis in original) and p. 141.

dressing in the theatre is a double illusion, a parody of the whole societally dictated binary division of human beings'.[16]

In recent years scholars adopting modern theoretical approaches have begun to take it for granted that the women in Tirso's plays (though not only his) subvert usual gender roles and established patterns of sexual desire. Thus in an article which focuses on Tirso's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, Jelena Sánchez writes that 'the *comedia de capa y espada* is a site where the assumptions on the naturalness of gender identity are continually being challenged and subverted' and, on Doña Juana/Don Gil herself, that 'Tirso's queer slant on this cross-dressing character affords intriguing nuances about gender, desire and society previously overlooked in other studies'. She also finds 'homosexual undertones' in the play, particularly because of the use of the term *capón*.[17] Anita Stoll analyses two other cross-dressed characters, Jerónima, of *El amor médico* and the male protagonist of *El Aquiles*, finding in the former that, 'the movement of the representation of gender and identity is away from a strict binary division and toward a more flexible concept for the organization of the human sexual being' and in the latter that the indeterminate figure of Achilles 'touches the hidden truth of the illusiveness of sexual categories, a truth dimly recognized in the viewer's

[16] Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith, 'Introduction: Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age', in *Gender, Identity, and Representation in Spain's Golden Age*, ed. by Anita K. Stoll and Dawn L. Smith (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), pp. 9-18 (p. 13).

[17] Jelena Sánchez, 'The Transvestite Woman: A Paradigm of Feminized Masculinity and Society in Tirso de Molina's *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* (1615)', *Lengua y Literatura*, 1.1 (2006), 122-44 (p. 126 and p. 133).

pleasure'.[18] Elsewhere Stoll sees 'gender indeterminacy' as the 'main issue' raised by Tirso's cross-dressing plays and feels his drama helps us approach the 'truth' about gender.[19] Raúl Galoppe, in his study of gender and confusion in the Mercedarian's plays, informed by Lacanian theory, also finds *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* a suggestive work, seeing 'la ambigüedad de género sexual' as the 'dínamo de la acción' and insisting that, though the heroine, Juana, finally decides to be a woman and a wife, her choice 'incluye la posibilidad de haber elegido lo contrario'.[20] Matthew Stroud had already written, some years earlier, of the same character, that 'Juana's adventure allegorises one's search for sexual identity. Because men and women in society are only signifiers and, as such, susceptible to shifting meanings, she is able to alternate between them before the final fixing of her identity'.[21]

Scholars who apply modern theories about gender uncertainty and sexual ambiguity to Tirso's plays involving cross-dressed characters tend to downplay authorial intention, generic conventions and the significance of historical context. Modern-day understandings of the constructedness of gender and the fluidity of desire – only partially applicable in the

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[18] Stoll, 'Cross-dressing in Tirso's *El amor médico* [Love, the Doctor] and *El Aquiles* [Achilles]', p. 93 and p. 103.

[19] Anita K. Stoll, 'Do Clothes Make the Man? Gender and Identity Fluidity in Tirso's Plays', *Romance Languages Annual*, 10.2 (1998), 832-35 (p. 834 and p. 835).

[20] Raúl A. Galoppe, *Género y confusión en el teatro de Tirso de Molina* (Madrid: Pliegos, 2001), p. 170.

[21] Matthew D. Stroud, *The Play in the Mirror: Lacanian Perspectives on Spanish Baroque Theater* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996), p. 175.

early-modern period – can be marshalled in support of these approaches.[22] And, indeed, the very nature of drama, as a form which is destined to be interpreted again on stage for each new generation, allows scholars to present radical re-readings even of stock situations. Where, on the other hand, an attempt is made to argue that the prevalence of plays involving transvestism reflects historical concerns, the argument is usually that the playwrights are dramatizing a pervasive anxiety about gender. Kathleen Regan, for example, attributes the concern of moralists about transvestism on stage (as well as other related issues) to a worry about the breakdown of normal, 'natural' gender categories.[23] Sidney Donnell, in his monograph, *Feminizing the Enemy*, uses Butler, amongst other gender studies theorists, to argue that the prevalence of transvestism in Golden Age theatre – particularly cases of men dressed as women – reflected a profound concern with and contestation of notions of masculinity and femininity in Spain. He claims that, 'cross-dressing in both text (reading and writing) and stage performance served as one of the principal means of exploring variant signs of identity and of interrogating the dominant discourse that supported the ruling elite in the Golden Age'. And cross-dressing, for Donnell, 'often led to the possibility of same-sex desire, which, in turn, undermined social hierarchies under patriarchy'.[24]

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[22] See Bradbury, especially pp. 566-69 and Heise, p. 370, on differences between early-modern and later ideas about sex and gender and for further bibliography on the subject.

[23] Kathleen Regan, 'Los moralistas según Butler: una perspectiva postmodernista sobre la identidad sexual en el teatro del Siglo de Oro', in *Lesbianism and Homosexuality in Early Modern Spain*, ed. by María José Delgado and Alain Saint-Saëns (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2000), pp. 281-303 (p. 281).

[24] Sidney Donnell, *Feminizing the Enemy: Imperial Spain, Transvestite Drama, and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p. 26 and pp. 272-73.

This connection between dramatists' enthusiastic embracing of the *mujer vestida de hombre* (and more occasional creation of the *hombre vestido de mujer*) and the realities of the social world beyond the *corral* is speculative, especially given the absence of detail about actual *comedia* performance in the Golden Age. In her comparative study of transvestism on the English and Spanish stages in the early-modern period, Heise reminds her reader, by analysing moralists' concerns, that in Spain 'a woman in male attire appears even more attractive than in her usual clothing' because her figure is enhanced.[25] She thus outlines a different possible reason for the popularity of the cross-dressed female but goes on to argue that the identification of the male sections of the audience with such figures – and the consequent effeminizing effect on them – is the source of the anxiety of church and state where the belief was that 'when the male is confronted with unconcealed, un-covered femininity, he reacts not by asserting his difference but by imitating and adjusting to the female'.[26] The authorities are anxious in this period precisely because gender is not as clearly defined as it later became: it is 'fundamentally unstable' and 'anchored in biological difference'.[27] Women in the audience would also have found that the female transvestite 'sets free powerful erotic energies with the potential to attract and subdue men', thus appealing to fantasies of escape and empowerment, not tendencies toward same sex desire.[28] Thus

[25] Heise, p. 367.

[26] Ibid., p. 369.

[27] Ibid., p 369 and p. 371. See also Soyer, pp. 17-18.

[28] For a discussion of this question with regard to historical cases of female transvestism, see Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 155.

'seductive and empowering to both men and women, the transvestite also leaves both genders at the same time deeply disconcerted'.[29]

My intention in this study is to ask questions of three related but less well-known comedies by Tirso de Molina – *La villana de la Sagra*, *La mujer por fuerza* and *La huerta de Juan Fernández* – in the light of these sometimes conflicting critical readings and the playwright's intriguing depictions of Serafina, who seems so clearly to blaze a trail for her sex, and Doña Juana who, as Don Gil, wreaks havoc in Madrid society partly through the performance of a new, softer masculinity. To what extent can we say that this dramatist's predilection for producing cross-dressed characters reflects an ambiguity about sexuality or a re-negotiation of gender roles within seventeenth-century Spain? Do other women conform to these novel types? How important were they to the playwright's outlook? The works in question, , all involve emboldened women who dress as men throughout almost all of the stage action, and they also feature numerous other examples of disguise, invention and role-playing.

La villana de la Sagra (1611?)

This is an early example of a play by Tirso which makes use of transvestite disguise.[30] The heroine is Doña Inés, a Galician noblewoman, who flees an uncomfortable social situation by dressing as a man and travels south after her brother who has already left their home in pilgrim's garb. As Pallares notes of this work: 'muestra ya Tirso la tendencia al múltiple juego con el disfraz, tendencia que será muy característica en su teatro de

[29] Heise, p. 372 and p. 374.

[30] On the date of this comedy see Pallares's 'Introducción biográfica y crítica' in, Tirso de Molina, *La villana de la Sagra* / *El colmenero divino*, ed. by Berta Pallares (Madrid: Castalia, 1984), pp. 46-48. Quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

disfrazadas, sobre todo, pero que se marcará también en el disfraz masculino'.[31] The point is an important one. It reminds us that it is not only women who disguise themselves in Tirso's theatre and, relatedly, that disguise is a common and versatile comic recourse for the dramatist which opens up multiple possibilities. In this case both siblings, Inés and Luis, anticipate later Tirsian characters by inventing personae and disguises within their disguises and exploiting others' more rigid perceptions in order to further their own ends within the drama. The dizzying role-playing leads Inés to a somewhat surprising romantic fate and Luis to a period of madness, akin to that of the literary model, Orlando, before his life is set back on a healthy course.

Inés's transvestism is prompted by an emergency, not the pursuit of a recalcitrant lover (like Doña Juana of *Don Gil*) or the search for a new identity or an expression of sexual or gender uncertainty (like Serafina of *El vergonzoso*). Whilst her brother, Don Luis, and his servant, Carrasco, swap 'el sayal por el damasco' (*La villana*, l. 237) and dress as pilgrims to escape Galicia after the former kills Don Juan in a fight resulting from a game of cards, Inés must flee the attentions of the dead man's brother, Don Pedro, who has been wooing her aggressively while her own sibling gambles away her dowry. Now completely unchaperoned she must act and her aims are clearly expressed. She leaves her maid, Camila, in charge of the family house and sets out, dressed as a man, for Toledo where she suspects Luis will have gone to see their uncle. In taking her decision Inés is bold and self-confident, like many of Tirso's women characters, 'porque yo, mudando el traje, / pienso mudar la ventura' (*La villana*, ll. 607-08). When the audience catches up with Inés in male clothing and armed with a sword at the start of act II, *en route* to her destination, her determination to end her misfortune through her own endeavour remains undimmed. In two rousing *redondillas* which

[31] Ibid., p. 45.

open the act she asks what 'empresa nunca intentada' a woman will not undertake 'cuando está determinada' (*La villana*, l. 1007 and l. 1010). She is aiming to relieve her troubles, 'y ya mi inquietud podrá / dar a mis trabajos treguas' (*La villana*, ll. 1017-18). She has been cornered by misfortune and experienced trials and tribulations but is not overtly giving expression to a different selfhood or identity. It is difficult to see in her case 'the crux of transvestism' being 'a profound identification of the self with the opposite sex', as Bradbury argues (with particular reference to *El Aquiles*).[32] Maleness and possession of a sword allow her to escape danger and then give her free and safe passage through the inns and on the roads of Spain. There is no hint, at this stage, of any ulterior motive for the transvestite disguise.

Inés never makes it as far as Toledo because she comes across her brother and Carrasco in La Sagra. The moneyed uncle has died at an inopportune moment and the Pope has inherited his estate. A deflated Luis has returned to the place where, on his way to Toledo, he fell for a beautiful and rich *villana*, Angélica. Overhearing their conversation, Inés, much more proactive and single-minded than her undisciplined brother, elects to follow them. She will not reveal her identity in order to avoid his displeasure and 'para no le ser en todo / mujer y carga pesada' (*La villana*, ll. 1085-86). She is aware that, once discovered and back under his jurisdiction, her role as a woman will be a passive one again. She will need looking after and will consequently lose her new-found freedom. In fact, with his typical satirical irony, Tirso has her decide actively to protect her inept sibling from himself when she realizes he is in love with a local girl:

> Yo vine a buena ocasión.
>
> Aquí me importa quedar

[32] Bradbury, p. 576.

para que pueda estorbar,

si no es buena, esta afición;

no haga algún desatino;

que amor como ciego y loco

puede mucho y sabe poco (*La villana*, ll. 1095-1101).

An equivalent of these lines would normally be spoken by the suspicious brother, anxious that his sister might be about to bring the family honour into disrepute through a foolish infatuation. However, by reversing the typical *comedia* roles and pointing to the unusual nature of the situation that has occurred through individuals' failings, Tirso can ridicule the world about him. 'His comedies aim to show', as Halkhoree has argued, 'how absurd man and his follies can be'.[33] Soon Inés, calling herself Guzmán, takes up with Don Pedro, the foolishly besotted nobleman who, as it happens, demonstrates the truth of her lines about love's madness and blindness in having vainly attempted to abduct the *villana*, Angélica, in act I. In serving him, as she admits in an aside (*La villana*, ll. 1185-90), she can continue to monitor her brother and his potentially disastrous love affair.

Thus far the transvestite disguise has been typically functional. It has not involved, in the person of Doña Inés, any illicit sexual desires or conscious uncertainty about gender. The new possibilities that dressing and behaving as a man permit her seem attractive. It does also result in her brother appearing weak and indecisive – unmanly – in comparison. In attempting to make up for Luis's neglect of their family and lack of care for its future, by beginning to play the male whose concern this should be, Inés adheres to a conservative agenda. There is nothing in her behaviour as a man to match the unbridled performance of Serafina. As is

[33] P. R. K. Halkhoree, *Social and Literary Satire in the Comedies of Tirso de Molina*, ed. by José M. Ruano de la Haza and Henry W. Sullivan (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1989), p. 269.

often the case in Tirso's plays which feature strong women, the men are proportionately lacklustre figures who need to be enlightened, a point made by Halkhoree in his study of the Mercedarian's comedies: 'woman emerges as a force for order, stability, sanity and morality in a world where male domination tends to produce selfish self-centredness, chaos, immorality and confusion of values'.[34] Thus, there is less an agenda for the reconstruction of the female role than there is a recognition of the failings of the male.

Whilst wearing the breeches, Inés's desires remain strictly heterosexual. She may have rejected her noble suitor back at home but she falls for her new master, Don Pedro (*La villana*, l. 1196), and is jealous of Angélica (whom he loves) when she sees her beauty for the first time (*La villana*, ll. 1386-88). It is the desire she feels for Don Pedro that prompts Inés to become bolder still in her use of male disguise. Still dressed as a page she tells Angélica that she is really the noblewoman, Doña Juana from Valladolid, who has been seduced by Don Pedro, whom she is now serving incognito. She is not at all interested in attracting Angélica to her – a common stratagem of the transvestite in plays such as *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* or *La mujer por fuerza* – but wants to prevent her from marrying Pedro by slandering him. In asking her to feign attraction for him she intends to ensure he stays in the area and this is how she wins Angélica's sisterly sympathies and agreement to act.

In fact Angélica does not fall for Inés (as we might have expected her to do), having herself been swept off her feet by Luis, now disguised as the *villano* and soon-to-be beekeeper, Tomé, because of his appearance, his wit and his charm: '¡Qué buen talle de Tomé!'; '¡Oh qué discreto Tomé! / Gracia extraña manifiesta' (*La villana*, l. 1375 and ll.

[34] Ibid., p. 148. The play's protagonist, Angélica, with whom I am less concerned in this study, shows similar good sense – and without the male clothing – in arguing with her father against marriage to the nobleman, Don Pedro (*La villana*, ll. 1235-46).

1425-26). These are the kinds of asides that Tirso's women often speak in admiration of the female in male attire who charms them with her words and actions, but being attractive is by no means the preserve of female transvestites. Whilst inadequate in one male role (brother) Luis proves adept at another (lover), and his success is brought about by escaping from himself, through disguise. In this play, then, it is a male character who reforms and develops through changing clothes and playing a different role, the pilgrim and then humble beekeeper.

As a *mujer vestida de hombre*, the actress playing Inés in *La villana de la Sagra* might, from past experience, have expected to have to arouse desire in the minds of other female characters, attracting them to her brand of performed masculinity. Usually common in the *comedia*, this convention is absent in this comedy though Tirso does find a novel way to present an apparent case of same-sex attraction. Inés (in the guise of the page, Guzmán, now claiming to be Doña Juana) and Angélica embrace in female solidarity, only for the latter's cousin, Feliciano, to appear inconveniently and overhear them. He immediately falls for Inés/Juana, 'Por Dios, que es el paje dama. / ¿Quién puede ser, que es hermosa?' (*La villana*, ll. 1638-39) and pursues her, making her aware in code that he knows who she is (Doña Juana) and that he loves her. He asks her, as Guzmán the page, to tell Juana that he wishes to be her lover. Thinking quickly, Inés has to claim she is actually Guzmán, Juana's page, sent *by* her to pretend to *be* her and thus dissuade Angélica from marrying. To underline her masculinity, she says she is a man and that:

> como muestras dello dan
> en Toledo más de algunas
> que están meciendo en las cunas
> muñequitos de Guzmán (*La villana*, ll. 1747-50).

By presenting herself as a father of numerous children she frightens him off with her heterosexual prowess, as she has warned a suspicious Carrasco off earlier with a threat of male violence, 'Hombre soy que un rostro cruza / si me enojo …' (*La villana*, ll. 1469-70). Feliciano is so upset to find that, though his love is real, his lady is 'fingida' and it is an apparently homosexual desire he harbours, that he attempts to stab himself. Inés prevents him from doing so (*La villana*, at l. 1786) but will, in fact, be tricked into a marriage to him at the end of the play as her own machinations become too complicated to control.

In *La villana de la Sagra* the female transvestite, Inés, is an intriguing figure. She discovers a freedom in male attire in a bid to escape her native region and invaded family home, and then embraces it, by plotting to pursue the dual goals of protecting her brother from his own foolishness and bidding to marry Don Pedro. In this regard she conforms to the norm that Sullivan observes in Tirsian cross-dressed heroines: 'no sólo sufre una metamorfosis superficial, sino una transformación al parecer interna, que se hace evidente en el comportamiento social e interpersonal'. However, although Sullivan goes on to argue that 'además de trasladar estas características psicológicas internas, Tirso pasa casi sin excepción al desarrollo de las ambigüedades lesbianas a que tales situaciones dramáticas podían prestarse', no women in fact fall for Inés in male guise and she is only found physically attractive by Feliciano who believes (correctly) that she is a woman.[35] Her story is secondary to that of her brother and Angélica (the eponymous *villana*) and she seduces the wrong man in the end, leading to a perhaps grudging acceptance of Feliciano's hand in marriage, 'Mi dueño sois desde agora' (*La villana*, l. 3129), as her voice disappears from the play. Inés, like some of her fellow transvestites, has revealed something of the performative nature of gender to excellent comic effect, but in her case it is hard to find evidence of sexual ambiguity in the

[35] Sullivan, p. 813.

role-playing or to claim that a concern with early-modern gender politics is a major theme of the comedy.

La mujer por fuerza (1612-13?)

In another early comedy, Tirso makes his cross-dressed runaway, Finea, the undisputed protagonist and rewards her invention with her desired marriage to the *conde* Federico, the man she has followed from Hungary to Naples.[36] This is a play which has attracted some scholarly attention in recent years in part thanks to a successful production by a Mexican troupe in Chamizal in 1989.[37] One scholar has found in it a concentration on

[36] See P. R. K Halkhoree, 'The "Context of Situation" in Tirso's *La mujer por fuerza*', *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, 43:2 (1991), 259-68 (p. 260), for the debate on authorship, and the *preámbulo* to de los Ríos's edition of the play for its possible date, Tirso de Molina, *Obras dramáticas completas*, ed. by Blanca de los Ríos, 4 vols (Madrid: Aguilar, 1989), I, 499-547. Quotations are taken from this edition and given by page number and column.

[37] See Ruano de la Haza's preface to Halkhoree, 'The "context of situation"', p. 259 and Charles Ganelin, 'Designing Women: Tirso's *La mujer por fuerza* on Stage', in *Hispanic Essays in Honor of Frank P. Casa*, ed. by A. Robert Lauer and Henry W. Sullivan (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 135-45. The play was also performed, in Almagro, Spain in 2008. The director on this occasion was José Maya and the production is reviewed by Duncan Wheeler, 'From the Town with more Theaters than Taxis: Calderón, Lope and Tirso at the 2008 Almagro Festival', *Comedia Performance*, 9 (2012), 102-42 (pp. 125-30). The Centro de Documentación Teatral in Madrid has a recording of this event, no. 4556.

'human sexuality',[38] another has noted that 'homosexual innuendo pervades the text',[39] and a third has drawn attention to the 'ambigüedad en el marco de la diferencia sexual y de parámetros homoeróticos que […] subyacen en el texto y en la acción de la obra'.[40] Does this second early Tirsian comedy come closer, then, to dramatizing characters' sexual ambiguity or latent homosexuality through transvestism and role-playing?

The play charts the single-minded pursuit by the Hungarian noblewoman, Finea, of the Neapolitan count, Federico, who has stayed at her brother's house whilst on a successful diplomatic mission to her country. She has been kept from meeting him by this sibling, Alberto, who is – or so he says – worried that Federico would have to offer her expensive gifts if he met her. The privation has whetted her appetite, though, and she has spied upon the house guest until, as she admits conventionally, 'al fin me vine a perder, / que mal se pueden guardar / los ojos de una mujer' (*La mujer*, p. 505b). Her love is sparked by heterosexual desire, on which she dwells, and she divulges the secret to her servant, Fabio, explaining her decision (which she describes as an 'atrevimiento') to don transvestite disguise:

> Yo pienso mudar el traje,
> sin que me obligue y me reporte
> la afrenta de mi linaje;
> ver de Nápoles la corte,
> y en ella servir de paje.

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[38] Anita K. Stoll, 'A Feminist Reading of *La mujer por fuerza*' in *Looking at the* Comedia *in the Year of the Quincentennial*, ed. by Barbara Mujica and Sharon D. Voros (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 103-10 (p. 103).

[39] Ganelin, 'Designing Women', p. 135.

[40] Galoppe, p. 170.

No repliques, cierra el labio,

si me vas a reprender,

porque en resistiendo, Fabio,

la furia de una mujer

dará en el mayor agravio (*La mujer*, p. 505b).

In taking her decision Finea is less concerned about her apparent change in sex than the change in class, giving voice to an anxiety about her drop in social status as she takes on the conventional role of the female page. Again the disguise is initially a way for the restricted noblewoman to break free of her social role and travel without risking her chastity.

In *La mujer por fuerza*, unlike in *La villana de la Sagra*, Tirso places considerable emphasis on the physical appearance of the transvestite, perhaps in order to prepare the audience for the scenes in which Finea (as the page, Celio, but pretending to be Don Alonso, the illegitimate son of the King of Aragon) will attract Federico's Neapolitan lover, Florela. (Here the strategy is similar to Doña Juana's in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*.) When Finea/Celio joins the count and his servant, Clarín, to journey to Italy, 'he' is described as appearing 'de hombre muy galán' in the stage directions and both men comment on 'his' 'talle' and 'brío' (*La mujer*, p. 508a). Federico takes his appearance as a guarantor of his 'calidad' (*La mujer*, p. 508b), not noting any feminine features, and Clarín immediately assumes that Celio will usurp him in the role of messenger between the count and Florela when they reach Naples, 'que sois muy acomodado' (*La mujer*, p. 510a). He is correct: Celio's charm and 'entendimiento divino' (*La mujer*, p. 514a) persuade the count to promote him, allowing him to wear a sword, and he asks him to be his go-between. There is no hint of Finea/Celio appearing half-male and half-female, as happens in *Don Gil* or, briefly, in *La villana de la Sagra*.

Even Clarín, the *gracioso*, the character who (like *Don Gil*'s Caramanchel) would usually see through the disguise or at least comment on the transvestite's deficiency and effeminacy, remains silent on the subject. He does refer briefly to Celio's lack of facial hair but only in pointing out that he is as yet inexperienced in dealing with women (*La mujer*, p. 515b), though Clarín is anxious, having looked 'con cuidado' and 'muchas veces' (*La mujer*, p. 515a) at Celio, that he might steal his own lover:

> Y esta pícara que adoro
> es una veleta al aire,
> que en mirando tu donaire
> me ha de perder el decoro (*La mujer*, p. 515a-b).[41]

As Halkhoree points out, Finea/Celio's indignant instinct to defend women faced with Clarín's matey misogyny 'leads to a conflict between her own feminine personality and her male *persona*', which in truth never threatens the maintenance of her mask but does create a rich comic moment.[42] She acts well but never forgets that she is a woman, acting for love.

Those scholars who have noted homosexual overtones in this transvestite comedy, or a Tirsian engagement with the complexity of human sexuality, have most prominently in

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[41] A similar point is made by Restrepo-Gautier who describes the physical appearance of Finea as androgynous but rightly goes on to note that, 'Clarín interpreta su androginia como señal de juventud', not sexual ambivalence. Pablo Restrepo-Gautier, 'Mujeres varoniles y masculinidades en *La mujer por fuerza* y *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* de Tirso de Molina', in *Ramillete de los gustos: burlas y veras en Tirso de Molina*, ed. by Ignacio Arellano (Burgos: Fundación Instituto Castellano y Leonés de la Lengua, n.d.), pp. 373-85 (p. 376).

[42] Halkhoree, 'The "context of situation"', pp. 269-70. This scene was nevertheless cut from the 2008 production of the play at Almagro.

mind Finea's seduction of Florela in act II, as well as her relationship with the lady of ill repute, Fenisa. Both of these are cases in which a woman (one noble, the other plebeian) falls for a *mujer vestida de hombre* absolutely confident that 'she' is a 'he', and perhaps there is a frisson in the audience at this, albeit inadvertent, same-sex desire. In the former case, in the main plot, Finea/Celio declares her love to Florela seductively, obliquely and cleverly, in order to try to destroy her relationship with Federico. She deceives with the truth, saying she is nobler than she has hitherto appeared, and with a lie, claiming to be Don Alonso, the illegitimate son of the King of Aragon (*La mujer*, p. 522a). All is fair in matters of love and Finea woos her with the long story of Alonso's misfortunes and bravery in travelling across Europe, only to be struck down by an uncontrollable passion for her, Florela. The performance is a good one, appealing to Florela's empathy and shallow desire to climb socially (and not overtly making use of her own good looks or dress, whether feminine or masculine).[43] In the 2008 Almagro production the seduction involves a lover's kiss. It helps Finea's cause that Florela believes that the *conde* really has run off with this Finea, Alberto's sister from Hungary, because she is now vengefully jealous and ready to shift her affections. Finea capitalizes by promising to bring this Hungarian woman to see her and so prove Federico's betrayal beyond reasonable doubt. (In a typically exuberant Tirsian twist to the comedy, she in fact later does this by exploiting her control over the infatuated Fenisa to have her play the role in front of Florela.)

Fenisa, then, is the other woman who has fallen for Celio/Finea, as Clarín (who introduced them) reports, 'Yo sé que te quiere bien, / y que me alaba tu brío' (*La mujer*, p.

[43] Restrepo-Gautier explains that 'la nobleza de Finea/Celio completa la seducción y hace que Florela olvide sus objeciones iniciales sobre la *apariencia juvenil* de su pretendiente', p. 378 (my emphasis).

529a). By act III she is shown as besotted with 'him', and is putty in Finea's hands. As one might imagine, their relationship has stopped short of sexual consummation and Fenisa has complained to Clarín that her new lover is 'tibio' (*La mujer*, p. 528b), surprising in his view, given her general manliness. (Celio/Finea has just helped defend the count from a gun attack by Alberto who has come to Naples to find his missing sister.) Finea explains, adequately if not convincingly, to the *gracioso*, her reluctance to have sex with Fenisa, but the vulgarity of the scene, though low comic in nature, cannot but bring the topic of sex between women, and sexual intercourse in general, into the spectator's mind.[44] However, the dramatic function of the Finea-Fenisa relationship is for the former to exploit the unfettered love of the latter to help in her strategic attack on Florela, her rival. No conscious homosexual desire is expressed or even suggested and Tirso completes the joke with Finea's last line of the play: when her identity has finally been revealed, she advises Clarín that she left Fenisa untouched for him to enjoy, 'pues como estaba la dejo' (*La mujer*, p. 547b). The return to the topic and to heterosexual expectations at the play's close disarms the subversive force it may have possessed and provides a final laugh at the expense of the dupes.

The final hint of homosexual attraction in the play comes just a few lines from the end when Finea, still dressed as Celio, is told by the King of Naples to reveal himself as Don Alonso (an imaginary figure, of course) and marry Florela. Celio demurs, saying 'he' must marry the *conde* Federico instead, to general surprise and consternation. A same-sex marriage seems a ludicrous suggestion. Halkhoree sees this resolution as 'an unorthodox handling' of a conventional situation, that is, the unveiling of the disguised woman. And he finds

[44] These scenes were also cut in the Almagro production in which it was the heterosexual desire of Finea/Celio for Federico that was underlined. For example, before the start of act II, Finea briefly touches her master erotically while dressing him.

'implications of sexual perversion here, which echo similar situations in *El amor médico* and *Don Gil*'.[45] No doubt the raising of this possibility, however remote, might call attention fleetingly to a taboo subject, the expression of male homosexual desire, but it has two other more important and immediate effects in the play. First, it establishes Finea's victory as unusually complete. Even at this late stage nobody has any idea that she is a woman in disguise and the king is forced to do her will and impose silence on the matter, 'en lo demás / pongo perpetuo silencio' (*La mujer*, p. 547b). There will be general relief at Finea's female identity and heterosexual aims. And second, it allows the playwright to complete the apparent descent into madness of the count who feels he is haunted by a woman he has never met and is now asked to marry a man. The effect is once again primarily comic on stage and the situation is quickly remedied by Finea's unequivocal, 'No puedo / ser hombre, que si lo fuera / no tratara de casamiento / contigo' (*La mujer*, p. 547a). The Almagro production bears out this reading, emphasizing both the *conde*'s madness and Tirso's comic desire to 'subvert the hierarchy of gender roles' in the play.[46]

Role-playing once again opens up the possibility of difference, of novelty, drawing attention to social norms and ingrained modes of behaviour. By becoming a man through disguise, a woman can benefit from a new role within patriarchy to express her desires covertly, but if Tirso's comedy contains hints of female and male homosexuality through misunderstanding or misrecognition there are no conscious expressions of homosexual desire in its text at all. In the words of Restrepo-Gautier, writing of this play and *Don Gil de las*

[45] Halkhoree, 'The "context of situation"', p. 271.

[46] Wheeler, p. 128.

calzas verdes, 'está claro […] que el objetivo de las mujeres varoniles no es la satisfacción de deseos homosexuales'.[47]

Scholarly arguments for the underlying presence of sexual ambiguity in the play rely in part on the dual possibilities of the interpretation of the title, *La mujer por fuerza*. It has been pointed out that the phrase can mean both 'the wife perforce' and 'the woman by force', an observation which, Ganelin reports, emerged from a discussion after the Chamizal production in 1989. He expresses the view that, 'the play's many sexual ambiguities derive from its title',[48] and elsewhere writes of the comedy that, 'from its very title [it] problematizes the nature of gender, its representation, and its viewing' and that 'Finea seeks a kind of recognition for her gender, and cross-dressing allows her to pursue that goal'.[49]

The recent Almagro production emphasized visually the proto-feminist credentials of Tirso's play, bringing out the success of Finea's strategies: the advantages she gains in disguising her sex, inventing personae to excite the desires of other characters and manipulating social norms. She is the dominant character and wins her man by behaving like one. However, within the play-text (and indeed within this production of the comedy), Finea is not expressing frustration at being forced to be a woman, she is not fighting a battle on behalf of her sex, but for herself. She abuses her fellow women, the noble Florela and the plebeian Fenisa, just as the eponymous protagonist of *Marta la piadosa*, will outsmart her sister, without compunction, in a competition for her lover's affections. The play's title, *La*

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[47] Restrepo-Gautier, p. 379.

[48] Ganelin, 'Designing Women', p. 135.

[49] Charles Ganelin, 'Who Was That Masked Woman? Female Identity in Tirso de Molina's *La mujer por fuerza*', *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literatures*, 6-7 (1995), 103-21 (p. 103 and p. 107).

mujer por fuerza, is tantalizing on a play-bill, allowing for both of the above-mentioned possibilities, but in the comedy itself, the formulation is only used by the *conde* Federico, lamenting that he appears to be having a *wife* foist upon him willy-nilly (*La mujer*, p. 537a, p. 543b) and at the end where, conventionally, he admits that 'fuerza' has become 'voluntad' (*La mujer*, p. 547b). Finea is never forced against her will to be a woman but wants to return to being one as soon as practicable. The closest she comes to invoking the words of the title is when she explains in the play's first scene to Fabio how, as a woman, (the weakness of) her nature impelled her to spy on the handsome count while hidden by her brother from his view, 'Esto, Fabio, es ser mujer; / la inclinación me forzaba' (*La mujer*, p. 505a). This is not a woman forced to be such against her inclinations and who would rather be a man, but a woman admitting that she was unable to overcome the norms of her gendered behaviour and heterosexual desires.

Tirso's play demonstrates the importance of role-playing: a clever character who can act is able to play both male and female roles convincingly enough. A modern audience might agree with Judith Butler that the display of such histrionic awareness demonstrates that 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained'.[50] A modern director is likely to exploit this textual and dramatic potential. Finea creates the illusion of being a man by her dress and by taking on as many masculine traits as possible. However, this is a disguise, not a bid to express her latent masculinity or lesbian desires. To argue that such an expression is integral to Tirso's play, rather than being susceptible to being read into it, seems an over-interpretation of the evidence. Anita Stoll's observation that, '*La mujer por fuerza* can be read as subscribing to the current feminist theories regarding gender: that it is non-binary

[50] Butler, p. 136.

social construct which is created by performance' is of course very much a modern – and tangential – take on a play whose text was not written with such gender politics in mind.[51] If Tirso is interested in a particular idea in the play it is, though, one about male-female relationships (as one might expect in comedy). Halkhoree thought the play 'Tirso's handiwork' precisely because of the absurdity of the situation he creates, a characteristic playing with conventions: 'Federico says he will marry Finea if he sees her, and that starts off the action. The ensuing complication can only be resolved when the count discovers who Finea is, i.e. sees her'.[52] That is the contemporary idea that takes Tirso's attention, which is not to say that he did not perceive, in working it through, the sorts of questions about gender and performance that a modern director might like to highlight in a production of the comedy.

La huerta de Juan Fernández (1626)

This is an important play as far as the dramatist's use of transvestism is concerned because, as was his wont, Tirso self-consciously engaged with the conventions of the sub-genre he had contributed to establishing.[53] *La huerta de Juan Fernández* is a mature comedy which opens with a meeting at an inn of *two* women in male disguise, one noble, the other plebeian. Tirso's opening stage direction reads: 'Salen de camino Doña Petronila, vestida de hombre con bota y espuela, y Tomasa por otra puerta como lacayuelo, el capotillo con muchas cintas' (*La huerta*, at l. 1). The beginning gives a twist to the *capa y espada* norm of

[51] Stoll, 'A Feminist Reading', p. 109.

[52] Halkhoree, 'The "context of situation"', p. 261.

[53] Scholars agree on the dating of this play. See the 'Introducción biográfica y crítica' to Tirso de Molina, *La huerta de Juan Fernández*, ed. by Berta Pallares (Madrid: Castalia, 1982), pp. 42-43. Quotations are taken from this edition. A date of 1626 means it was written just after Tirso had been censured by the *Junta de Reformación*.

a pair of men meeting at an inn *en route* to the capital and joining forces. Both women are pursuing the man they aim to marry: the former has been promised marriage in a letter by a relative, Hernando, and the latter has already been seduced by the soldier, Mansilla. In both cases their disguises and tricks lead them to the desired goal and their pretend identities can be gleefully shed.

The transvestism in this play has some unusual aspects to it because the two women team up at first without realizing that their sex is the same. Both are alone and have survived, like Inés of *La villana de la Sagra*, without the help of a male servant. The *primer galán*, Hernando, is, as it happens, also in disguise, as a gardener, so that he may woo another lady, the noble Laura, in a possible Tirsian nod to Gil Vicente's sixteenth-century play, *Don Duardos*. Once again the work seems on the face of it to be interesting from the point of view of sexual ambiguity and gender performance. In particular we learn of a bedroom scene between the two transvestites in act I and, from act II, we witness the wooing of a rival *dama* by a woman in male disguise.

Henceforth to be known as Don Gómez and Barguillas, Petronila and Tomasa team up at their first meeting as they make for Madrid. The former does not seem to notice anything unusual about the latter but, taking the *gracioso* role, Tomasa comments on Petronila's youth and equates it with her own lack of facial hair arguing that 'engendra la semejanza / amor' (*La huerta*, ll. 150-51). The initial attraction between them and the development of a somewhat strained friendship is not dissimilar to that between male masters and servants who meet each other in countless *comedias* of the period and that fact itself indicates that there is nothing to suggest a same-sex attraction. Petronila likes Tomasa's wit, for example when she argues (ironically given their circumstances) that Spain would be a better place if individuals did not try to eat or dress above their station, and Tomasa is keen for the protection of a well-to-do master. 'Amor' here implies no more than a bond of mutually beneficial friendship.

At the height of the popularity of the *comedia nueva*, playwrights were constantly attempting to outdo each other and themselves in their innovations and witty variations on established convention. Tirso's novelty in the play's opening scene and in doubling the usual quota of cross-dressed women provides him with some untried possibilities rich in irony and comic potential. The unmasking of Petronila (as a woman) by Tomasa (who is also a woman) is a good example. Once again the intimate, potentially erotic scene is notable for an absence of any overt expression of homosexual desire. This third *salida* of the play takes place at night and begins with Petronila chasing Tomasa across the stage brandishing an unsheathed dagger, accusing 'him' of trying to steal her possessions while asleep in bed. (Tirso avoids staging the unmasking itself.) Tomasa, still in the role of a male (comic) servant, provides a long explanation for her unauthorized presence in her mistress's room: when removing Petronila's boots earlier that night she had noticed the petite size and fine condition of her feet and had become suspicious about her sex:

> "¡Vive Dios! (dije entre mí),
> pie adarme, que os han criado
> más para alfombra y estrado,
> que para que andéis ansí.
> Sospechas hembras, dudar
> en esto será mentir:
> mejor sois para parir,
> mi pie, que para engendrar" (*La huerta*, ll. 628-35).

Unlike Petronila, the audience is acutely aware that Tomasa is playing the man making the discovery and trying to sound like one. She casts herself, again comically given her station, as the mythical (and heterosexual) *conde* Partinuplés (*La huerta*, l. 552), trying to discover by candle-light and in secret the truth about his disguised lover, who has forbidden him to look

at her. The hot wax from the candle used in the investigation falls upon the lady's breast, wakening her and putting him in danger. This invasion of privacy and intimate knowledge would indeed be very threatening to a lady, unless it is carried out and possessed by another woman, such as her maid, whose role it would be to dress and undress her mistress. Doña Petronila's anger is directed towards a *male* servant and she agrees not to dismiss (or indeed kill) Tomasa/Barguillas only when the latter threatens to expose her 'invisible' mistress's identity, 'Daré noticia / pues que me echa, a la justicia, / que hay mujer vestida de hombre / en esta posada' (*La huerta,* ll. 701-04) and again emphasizes that they can be more efficient in pursuing their goals working in tandem. Petronila thinks that Tomasa is a man and is concerned not so much that she is vulnerable sexually but rather that her new acquaintance might be trying to trying to rob her, 'Traidor, ¿qué es de la maleta?' (*La huerta,* l. 549). Her class lends her a natural authority over her servant. And indeed Tomasa expresses no sexual interest in Petronila. Her description of looking carefully at her mistress for evidence of her female sex is nevertheless potentially titillating to a portion of the audience, though this might have been mitigated somewhat with its being couched as an anti-Patrarchan, comic-erotic description beginning at the foot and moving up the body to the hair. The fact that Tomasa is a woman and not a man allows Tirso to extend the unmasking scene to nearly 200 lines, since, for the contemporary audience and within this dramatic context, there is less impropriety in a woman gazing at another woman's body. Tomasa's motivation is knowledge (*La huerta,* l. 588) and the concomitant empowerment, on which the *mujer vestida de hombre* depends, not sexual interest or conquest, as a man's would conventionally have been. To play the transvestites Tomasa or Petronila as sexually ambiguous because of their nocturnal encounter would make no sense in the dramatic context, though Tirso certainly has recourse to a well-known erotic story and dwells in unusual detail upon the discovery of Petronila's real sex. As usual the dramatist does not shy away from such matters.

The exposure of Petronila leads to her telling Tomasa/Barguillas her long back story which explains her transvestite disguise. Like Finea, in *La mujer por fuerza*, she was kept from the eyes of a house-guest, her mother's cousin, Hernando, in Seville and as 'la privación es deseo' (*La huerta*, l. 776) she fell for him without his having seen her. When she lost her mother and her fortune to a storm, she decided to disguise herself, 'en busca de don Fernando, / del modo que ves vestida' (*La huerta*, ll. 1024-25), in the hope that her 'firme amor' (*La huerta*, l. 1021) for him might be rewarded with a marriage that he had promised her mother in a letter. As for many of Tirso's transvestites, operating out of their usual sphere, the journey becomes a voyage of self-discovery, but the goal remains a heterosexual, socially-sanctioned relationship. Tomasa is moved by the tale and begins to tell her own story, only to be interrupted mid-flow, before she can confess that she too is a woman and in the more parlous state of having been dishonoured.

If homosexual or ambiguous sexual desire appears to be missing from this fine scene between the two women it is certainly true that by act III of *La huerta de Juan Fernández*, the countess Laura has fallen for the still disguised Petronila, who has now become the (male) friend of the countess's Italian suitor, the *conde* Galeazo. Can this development, with parallels in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* and *La mujer por fuerza*, be seen as expressive of an ambiguous sexual desire on the part of Laura or, indeed, Petronila? In this case the action of the play sheds some interesting light on what has sometimes been seen as the *comedia*'s albeit unconscious presentation of same-sex desire. Gail Bradbury, for example, writing about 'irregular sexuality' in the *comedia nueva*, claims, counter to what I have been suggesting with regard to these three comedies, that, 'it is insufficient to say that because the true sex of the Spanish transvestite was unknown, her success in captivating other women was without unorthodox implication' and goes on, 'if the suggestion that women prefer

feminine beauty is not exactly equitable with lesbianism, it comes disconcertingly close to it'.[54]

In *La huerta*, two women are seen to attempt to seduce Laura: Tomasa, who is set up by Petronila to play the count; then Petronila herself, who is asked by Laura, though apparently only the count's servant, to pretend to be the *conde* Galeazo himself. Tomasa is despised as a buffoon: because of the stupidity that she has been instructed to display, Laura finds the figure wholly unattractive, calling 'him' 'necio' (*La huerta*, l. 1960) and feeling that the praise she has heard of his 'discreción, cara y presencia' must have been 'ironía' (*La huerta*, ll. 1976 and 1977). It is the self-presentation, not the physical appearance, which condemns this version of the count in Laura's eyes, demonstrating (again) that there is no automatic female attraction in Tirso's plays to femininity or feminine beauty hidden behind male attire. However, the witty and endearing version of the count, played by Petronila, is a hit. Petronila is physically attractive, it is true: the count says of 'him', 'de vuestra disposición / y talle no es maravilla / que Laura esté aficionada' (*La huerta*, ll.1429-31); and Laura herself praises Gómez/Petronila for 'his' 'talle y ingenio' (*La huerta*, l. 2138). Nevertheless, it is the quality of the performance that has Laura besotted with Petronila's version of the same individual. She demands that Gómez/Petronila act the count 'que aunque en tercera persona / deseo verle discreto' (ll. 2169-70) and 'he' obliges, flattering her, hinting that he *is* the real count, her cousin Galeazo, come in disguise from Italy to woo her, and seeming to know everything about her and her secret admirer, the gardener, Hernando. Petronila leaves Laura agog, 'sácame ya destas dudas, / dime si mi primo eres' (*La huerta*, ll. 2331-32), and completes the latter's *redondilla*, 'seré lo que tú quisieres, / si en amor desdenes mudas' (*La huerta*, ll. 2333-34). Finally Laura physically embraces the fake

[54] Bradbury, p. 577.

'count': she is in love with a construct, a version of Galeazo that Petronila knows will intrigue and tantalize her, and the 'feminine beauty' to which Bradbury refers has had little to do with the seduction. Once again the all-female embrace may be titillating to some in the audience who are in the know but Laura believes she has found a man whom she can love.

Petronila's 'seré lo que tú quisieres' could be an epigraph for this and many a Tirsian comedy. She, like other characters, male and female, will play any part, spin any yarn, if it helps her cause. Later, for example, in trying to persuade the recalcitrant Hernando to fulfil his promise made to her mother and marry her, she claims that Laura has gone beyond the 'límites honestos' (*La huerta*, l. 2962) in her relationship with Don Gómez (i.e. herself). This is further evidence, imaginary this time, perhaps titillating, of how the *mujer vestida de hombre* will manipulate and exploit others' expectations in pursuit of her own goals, which usually involve the end of the performance and social re-integration. This does not mean, of course, that nothing is learned or changed through the disguise and role-playing. Indeed, the very use and abuse of roles, the seeing through the structures and mechanisms of society, evident in the Golden Age penchant for metatheatre, surely demonstrates what we recognize as an early-modern sensibility, an awareness, sometimes instinctive sometimes knowing, of the constructedness of self and society.

Conclusion

Like a host of characters who perform in the *comedia*, the women who cross-dress in the three plays studied here reveal that Golden Age dramatists, perhaps especially Tirso, took advantage of the conventions of the *corral* stage to exaggerate and exploit this performative nature of social life in the period. The playwright's aims here are essentially comic. In this comic mode, through amused observation which engenders satirical and witty engagement, Tirso comments on the world around him, in terms of both broad social tendencies and small

human foibles. It is no surprise, then, that norms of female and male social behaviour and relationships between the sexes attract his attention.

Although there are moments when the words and actions of cross-dressed characters suggest sexual ambiguity, for the most part these are in passing, sometimes bawdily comic, and subsidiary to the playwright's primary concerns.[55] Where scholars have shone a light on these moments it has been because of their apparent modernity and the attention they receive is justified by the possibilities they present to the modern director and the revelations they provide about issues which are atemporal and universally human. However, I would argue that such moments, however seductive, were not of central importance for Tirso and his fellow playwrights. They were part of a greater dramatic reflection on their society, a reflection of a society in flux in many ways. Of Serafina's famous scene, in *El vergonzoso en palacio*, Jeremy Robbins writes, 'the playing with possibilities here is obviously deliberate, but trying to categorize Serafina as, in anachronistic terms, a transvestite, a lesbian or a transsexual seems of less immediate concern than that she relishes the opportunity to behave as a man, in dress, word and deed'.[56] Anne Cruz, in assessing Tirso's feminist credentials, comes to a similar measured conclusion, arguing that cases of cross-dressing 'consienten a la vez que las mujeres se identifiquen con otra parte de su ser, fragmentándose el personaje femenino en subjetividades disímiles, tal como sucede en las varias identidades de Juana en *Don Gil de las calzas verdes* y de Serafina en *El vergonzoso en palacio*'.[57]

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[55] Soyer too affirms that playwrights 'frequently incorporated female homoeroticism as a humorous device in their works' (p. 46).

[56] Robbins, p. 129.

[57] Anne J. Cruz, 'Tirso de Molina, ¿feminista? – El caso de *Marta la piadosa*', in *Rumbos del hispanismo en el umbral del Cincuentenario de la AIH: Actas del congreso de la Asociación*

It is right, then, to enthuse about Tirso's cross-dressed characters but because of the 'greater freedom of action, movement and expression', they discover in general through role-play, rather than because they hint at times at an ambiguous sexuality. [58] 'Transvestism does not change one's sexual orientation', asserts Stroud, and Tirso, while bawdy at times and ready to play with apparent homosexual attraction, does not suggest, simplistically, that it does.[59] What he does do, more importantly, in creating cross-dressed female characters, is to embody 'a powerful fantasy of all the social possibilities generally foreclosed to the female spectators in Spanish Renaissance society'.[60] This opening of possibilities for female spectators in the imagined stage world needs in turn to be contextualized within a more general questioning of Golden Age social norms which the comic *comedia* undertakes before its audience, and with especial verve and compassion in the hands of Tirso de Molina.

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Internacional de Hispanistas, 4 vols, (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 2012), IV, ed. Debora Vaccari, pp. 69-77 (p. 70).

[58] Robbins, p. 131.

[59] Stroud, p. 168.

[60] Heise, p. 372.