

## The Comic Function of Two Mothers: Belisa and Angela

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Williamsen-Cerón, Amy. "The Comic Function of Two Mothers: Belisa and Angela." *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 36:2 (1984): 167-74.

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### **Abstract:**

Much of the existing criticism dealing with the mother figure in the comedia consists of broad generalizations. The present study analyzes the comic function of two very different mother characters in an attempt not only to provide a greater understanding of their respective comedias (Lope's *La discreta enamorada* and Mira's *La casa del tahir*), but also to demonstrate that such generalizations tend to obscure important distinctions rather than illuminate them.

**Keywords:** Spanish Golden Age Theatre | Literary Criticism | Theater | *Comedia*

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## THE COMIC FUNCTION OF TWO MOTHERS: BELISA AND ANGELA

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Even though various key articles have done much to correct the misconception that there were no important mother characters in the Spanish Golden Age *comedia*, some of these articles have led to indiscriminate categorization, equating very distinct characters. Templin, in his basic article about the mothers in the *comedia* of Lope de Vega, discusses the Widow Type. Basing his comments on remarks made years earlier by Schevill, he argues that among the different types of «mothers», there exists the widow:

A homogeneous group of mothers, who could also be classified under the heading of character, embraces the «con-ning old female» as Prof. Schevill has called them. They may be appropriately termed the Widow Type....<sup>1</sup>

Such varied figures as the mothers from *El serafín humano*, *El amante agradecido*, *Los melindres de Belisa*, *Quien ama, no haga fieros* and *La discreta enamorada* are included without further explanation under this heading.

While this type of broad categorization does help orient readers toward certain stock types that appear throughout the *comedia*, individual characters rarely operate in strict accordance with such generalities. This failure to take into consideration the individual qualities of the characters involved presents a major problem. In this paper, I will

study the comic function of two mothers, both of whom might be considered as being «widow types.» Nonetheless, it would be naïve to equate Belisa from Lope de Vega's *La discreta enamorada* (1606-1608),<sup>2</sup> and Angela from Mira de Amescua's *La casa del tahir* (1616-1619),<sup>3</sup> for although they share various superficial similarities, each plays a very different role in the dynamics of their respective *comedias*.

A discussion of the comic function of the two characters will necessarily entail references to humor and laughter. Humor and laughter are difficult subjects to approach because, as Greig explains, laughter is a natural, spontaneous human function; yet people learn what to laugh at, what is to be considered «funny.»<sup>4</sup> In this sense, laughter and humor are governed by social conventions and are, therefore, culture specific. Nevertheless, there seem to be certain psychological universals that transcend temporal and cultural boundaries. It is the existence of such universals that allows a modern-day audience to enjoy the humor of many *comedias*, even if the significance of some of the puns, allusions, and ironic passages may be lost. María Grazia Profeti states convincingly:

. . . una gran parte de los juegos de palabras del teatro barroco pueden hoy resultar incomprensibles para un público que ha perdido el contexto referencial . . . con el cambio del código ideológico cambia el objeto y los modos de la risa. Pero si ciertas situaciones siguen teniendo su vigencia humorística, será necesario enfrentarse con dinámicas psicológicas universales.<sup>5</sup>

Various «psychological universals» that provoke laughter seem to be related to vice. Henri Bergson, in his famous essay, explains that human folly, when it does not result in lasting harm to anyone, is laughable. The laughter involved may serve a corrective function. He further argues that «the one failing that is essentially laughable is vanity.»<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely this vice, vanity, that Irving P. Rothberg attributes to Belisa. He states: «Belisa, la madre enviudada de *La discreta enamorada* tiene el defecto que es causa de lo cómico en la comedia. Su vanidad le lleva a creer que el capitán Bernardo y, luego, el hijo de éste [Lisardo] se han enamorado de ella.»<sup>7</sup> I believe Rothberg slightly overstates his case. Although Belisa's vanity is responsible for a great deal of «lo cómico» in the *comedia*, not all of the laughter associated with Belisa results from her vanity.

In the opening scene of the play, Belisa's speech to Fenisa, her unmarried daughter, regarding «proper behavior» is funny; yet the humor results from the contrast between Belisa's actions and her words, not her own vanity. While admonishing Fenisa to be more demure and to hurry along, she allows plenty of time for her to admire and be admired by the young men present. Belisa's words follow the dictates of society, while her actions belie her personal views. The scene definitely constitutes a comment on the customs of the time.

Later, when once again discussing proper behavior with her daughter, Belisa sets herself up as an example: «Fui ejemplo / en casa, en calle y en templo, / de una mujer recogida / los ojos tuve con llave . . .» (p. 158). Fenisa quips back: «Mi tía me dijo a mí / que hacías mil oraciones, / a un padre del yermo igual; / y haciendo esto, es señal / que casarte deseabas.» (p. 158). Belisa then retorts: «Nunca tal imaginé / Miente, por tu vida y mía / que antes monja ser quería, / y sin gusto me casé» (p. 158). In this case, the humor of the passage lies in the deflation of Belisa's pretensions of chastity and purity, as well as in the confrontation between ideals and reality.<sup>8</sup>

Vanity plays a major role in the humor of the scenes involving the Capitán, whom Belisa believes to be a potential suitor. When the Capitán comes to call, Belisa is convinced that he will ask for her hand in marriage. She suddenly becomes quite concerned with her appearance, a needless precaution, considering that the Capitán falls asleep:

Belisa: ¿Tengo alegre el rostro?

. . .

¿Parécete que provoca?

Fenisa: Sí, madre.

Belisa: ¿A qué?

Fenisa: A devoción.

. . .

No tengas tanta inquietud.

Belisa: ¿Cómo?

Fenisa: Tu galán se duerme . . . (p. 158)

Here several elements combine to create a very funny moment: Fenisa's taunting of her mother, Belisa's concern with her appearance contrasted with the Capitán's lack of interest and obvious frailty, and the staccato rhythm created by the quick exchange in broken verse lines.

Later, in the same scene, the humor lies in the revelation of the

distance between Belisa's expectations (that the Capitán wishes to marry her) and reality (that he wishes to marry Fenisa). Once aware of the Capitán's true intentions, Belisa responds gracefully, accepting the Capitán's offer on Fenisa's behalf.

Belisa is not presented as a wicked, vain woman; nor is her vanity so exaggerated as to make her a mere caricature. Her vanity, a very human flaw, renders Belisa susceptible to the trap that Fenisa lays for her. Vanity, combined with credulity, leads her to believe that Fenisa's story is true, that Lisardo, the Capitán's son, really desires her. At the end of the play, Belisa realizes how she has been manipulated by her own daughter, but she does not react in anger; rather, she accepts the situation gracefully. After all, the situation brought about by Fenisa's plotting is precisely the one that Belisa had wanted from the beginning. She has married the Capitán and Fenisa has found a suitable young husband. Everything ends in a satisfactory manner for Belisa; however, she herself did nothing to ensure her future — she was merely a pawn in her daughter's game.

Belisa, in *La discreta enamorada*, is often the butt of the joke. Much of the play's humor is funny *at her expense*. The comic role of Angela in *La casa del tahir* directly opposes that of Belisa. While Belisa claims to be more saintly than she is, Angela is very conscious of her own nature and of how others see her. Angela manipulates others; she is not manipulated by them.

Since *La casa* is less well-known than *La discreta enamorada*, a plot summary is warranted. The *comedia*, complete with various *enredos*, revolves around the return of a prodigal son to his family. The father, Marcelo, marries his son, Alejandro, to Isabela, a virtuous young woman. On the eighth day of the wedding festivities, Alejandro's friends come to visit and take him to Angela's house to gamble. Angela's mother, whose name is also Angela, encourages her unmarried daughter not to dissuade the advances of any of the young men that come to the house. Marcelo becomes aware of his son's gambling activities, and in an attempt to stop them, proposes marriage to the elder Angela, making her promise not to allow gambling in her house. She overhears Marcelo and his servant Roque discussing the «burla» they have planned. Angela, not to be outwitted, offers Marcelo her daughter's hand in marriage, with the provision that they be married by proxy. Before the wedding, the two Angelas switch places. At the end of the *comedia*, when the bride's true identity is revealed, Marcelo accepts the elder Angela as his wife.

In a speech similar to Belisa's opening discourse, Angela counsels

her unmarried daughter. Angela, however, does not uphold the social ideals regarding courtship and proper behavior. Instead, she upbraids her for wasting her time on a poor suitor, and tells her to seek money, not love: «Ese Carlos que ha venido . . . / mira que es pobre. Huye, tiembla.» (p. 44). «Ama el oro / Ama a tu madre / Ama a la virtud honesta.» (p. 47). When her daughter protests, saying that she believes in the powers of true love, her mother answers: «Esas son bachillerías / que aprendes en las comedias. / No irás más a los teatros; / que eres presumida y necia.» (p. 46). The scene is comical; the unexpected, «unorthodox» nature of the mother's advice is surprising. The metatheatrical nature of the comment regarding the *comedia* also contributes to the humor of the passage on another level. That Angela, a character in a play, blame the *theater* for the ideas her daughter holds regarding love is humorous, yet somewhat unsettling. Likewise, her mandate that her daughter not go to the theater anymore is paradoxical — as characters in a play, her daughter, and Angela herself, can exist *only* within the theater.

Angela, the mother, takes control of the situation by devising a scheme that will allow her to fulfill the role of the chaperon required by society, while she really acts more like a *tercera*. Feigning deafness, she sits by her daughter's side, listening to the remarks of the prospective suitors. She offers advice and commentary by «reading» aloud from non-existent passages in her «books of devotion.» For example, when Carlos speaks to her daughter of his love, Angela «reads»:

Oh necia, loca atrevida  
que no tomas los consejos  
de los padres y los viejos  
que son luces de la vida!  
¿Por qué tu amor lisonja  
se abate así a la pobreza?  
Ama, hija, la *riqueza*  
de un esposo verdadero.  
*/italics my own/* (p. 51)

She also openly encourages her daughter not to slight any of her *galanes* by not accepting their offerings of «devotion»: «Rapaza, no seas necia / ¿No ves que es grosería? / Los caballeros usan dar las rifas / y el tomar no se excusa.» (p. 50) Her daughter finally acquiesces, saying only «Pues si así se usa . . .» a line that Angela uses to her own advantage later.

Clearly, worldly concerns, especially economic ones, are of supreme importance to Angela. Yet, her efforts to inculcate her daughter with these same values fail repeatedly. Part of the humor of the play revolves around the conflict between the two positions represented.

Angela knows that she is no saint; she is painfully aware of the fact that her ruse could be discovered at any moment. In fact, when Alejandro protests against his luck with the cards, especially with the «sota,» she mistakes his complaint as an insult directed at her:

Alejandro: ¡Ah socarrona maldita!  
 ¡Vieja, engañosa, infiel!  
 ¡Estafadora cruel  
 que las haciendas nos quita!

¡Ah, sota, yo te maldigo!  
 Siempre tu azar me mató.

Angela: (¡Qué sobresalto me dió!  
 Pensé que hablaba conmigo.)

The humor in this passage is not caused by a character flaw within Angela, but rather by the «cross purposes» involved.

This type of humor resembles that present in the scene where Roque and Marcelo mock her, not knowing that she can hear all too well:

Roque: ¿A vieja  
 acortar queréis la toca?

Marcelo: ¡Qué haya creído esta loca  
 que enamorado me deja!

Roque: Dile ternezas.  
 . . . . .  
 Mamando está tus engaños.  
 Mujer de cuatro sentidos,  
 Vaya al Jordán por oídos  
 y déjese allá cien años.

In this example, the audience shares a feeling of complicity with Angela because of the knowledge that Angela can hear. If this were not so, the lines would lose a great part of their comic impact.

In my opinion, Angela is judged too harshly by James A. Castañeda who, in his book on Mira de Amescua, states: «She [Angela] is

discovered to be both a liar and an illiterate, however, when, after claiming in v. 2385 to be reading Fray Luis de Granada, it is discovered by Roque in v. 2425 that the book in question is actually *Don Quijote*.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Angela, who has already admitted that she does not know how to read very well, uses the book merely as a «prop» to make it appear as if she is reading. This is made clear when it is revealed that she is holding the volume upside down. That the book Angela claims to be a work of Fray Luis de Granada turns out to be *Don Quijote* is just another element of humor. As P.E. Russell has pointed out, *Don Quijote* was originally considered a very funny book; no doubt, a contemporary audience would have found the mention of Cervantes' masterpiece quite amusing, and quite appropriate considering Angela's character.<sup>10</sup>

If one psychological universal that elicits laughter is vanity, another would seem to be the enjoyment derived when someone succeeds in «pulling the wool» over the eyes of another who believes he has the upper hand. This explains, in part, why Angela is so amusing. While the other characters, especially Marcelo, feel superior, the audience knows that Angela herself actually controls the situation.

At the end of the play, all does end happily. Angela is exactly where she wanted to be. Unlike Belisa, however, she played a very active role in securing her good «fortune.» She was not a pawn in the hands of another; rather, she controlled others. Angela skillfully, if somewhat connivingly, tricked Marcelo into marrying her. Nevertheless, she did not succeed in manipulating her daughter. Despite her mother's objections, the younger Angela marries the man she wanted from the outset.

The danger of broad generalizations regarding character types is that they tend to lead to simplifications and, at times, falsifications by ignoring the unique traits of very different characters. The superficial similarities between the two mothers discussed at first seem apparent. Both Belisa and Angela are widows, concerned that their daughters marry well. Beyond these parallels, the two remain quite different. Each serves a distinct comic function—both characters are «funny,» but not for the same reasons. Belisa's vanity, presumptions, and false expectations contrast sharply with Angela's sharp wit, worldly «realism,» and her success in tricking those who intended to trick her. Belisa is the «burlada,» Angela is the «burladora.»

## NOTES

- 1 E.H. Templin, «The Mother in the Comedia of Lope de Vega,» *HR*, 3 (1935), 219-44.
- 2 Lope de Vega, *La discreta enamorada*, in *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, Vol. 24 (Madrid: Imprenta de los sucesores de Hernando, 1917), pp. 155-78. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.
- 3 Antonio Mira de Amescua, *La casa del tahir*, ed. Vern G. Williamsen (Madrid: Castalia, 1973). All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.
- 4 J.Y.T. Greig, *The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy* (New York: Cooper Square, 1969), p. 222.
- 5 María Grazia Profeti, «Código ideológico-social, medios y modos de la risa en la comedia del siglo XVII,» in *Risa y sociedad en el teatro español del siglo de oro* (Toulouse: Editions C.N.R.S., 1980), p. 15.
- 6 Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 174.
- 7 Irving P. Rothberg, «El agente cómico de Lope de Vega,» *Hispanófila*, VI, 16, 1962, p. 75.
- 8 Vern G. Williamsen, in his article «The Woman Characters in Lope de Vega's *La discreta enamorada*,» *Proceedings of the Second Annual Golden Age Spanish Drama Symposium* (El Paso: 1982), p. 136, explains: «Her [Belisa's] pious responses to Fenisa's barbed objections allow us to recognize the socially conditioned inhibitions that govern her words. It is clear that Belisa does not really mean she would rather have joined a convent than marry.»
- 9 James A. Castañeda, *Mira de Amescua* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1977), p. 89.
- 10 P.E. Russell, «Don Quijote as a Funny Book,» *MLR*, 54 (1969), 312-26.